SEARCHING FOR PALESTINE'S HIDDEN PLACES AND LOST MEMORIALS

Forgotten

RAJA SHEHADEH AND PENNY JOHNSON

ALSO BY RAJA SHEHADEH

A Rift in Time

We Could Have Been Friends, My Father and I

Going Home

Where the Line Is Drawn

Palestinian Walks

When the Bulbul Stopped Singing

ALSO BY PENNY JOHNSON

Companions in Conflict: Animals in Occupied Palestine

FORGOTTEN

Searching for Palestine's Hidden Places and Lost Memorials

RAJA SHEHADEH and
PENNY JOHNSON

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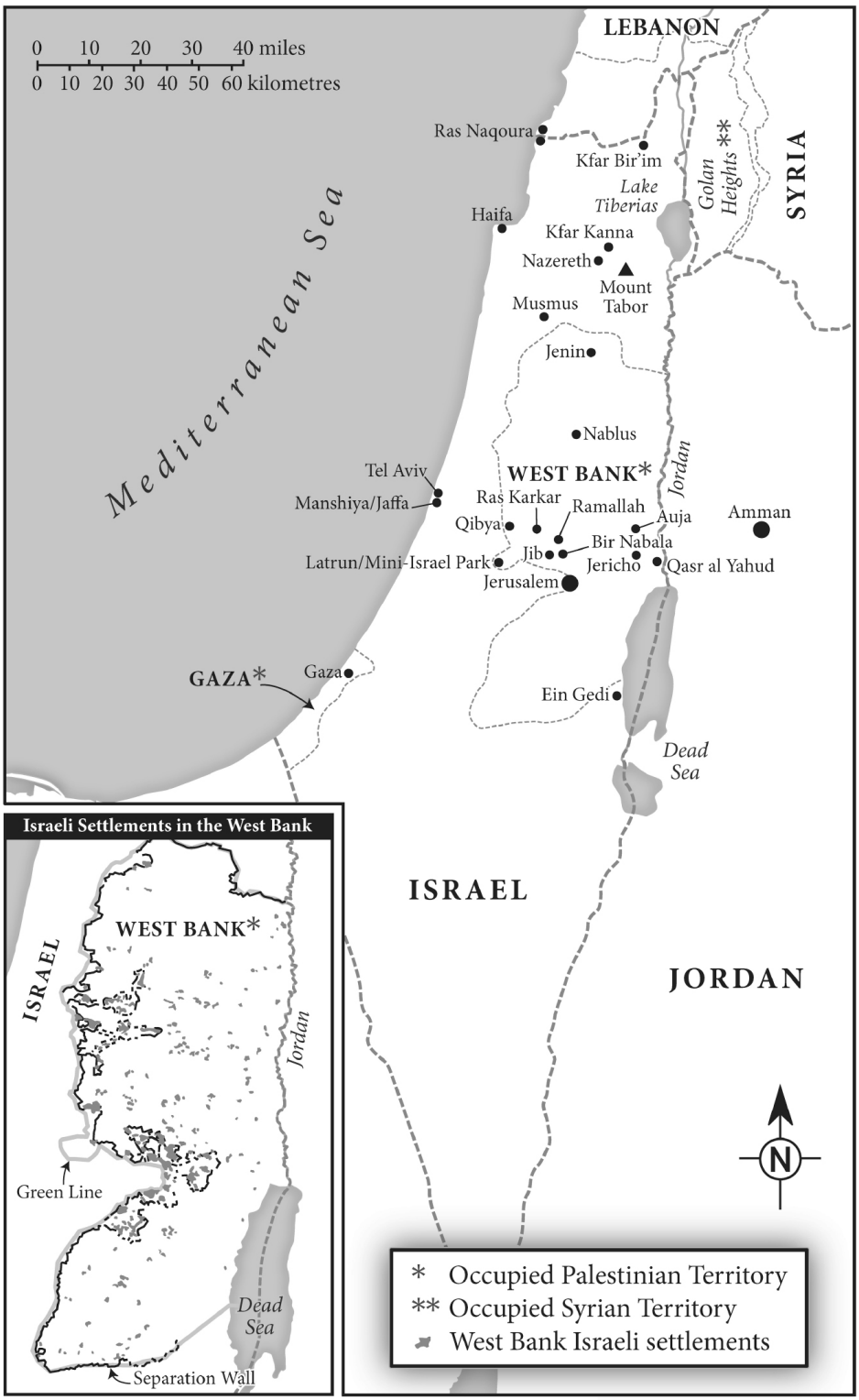
To Kamal Abdel-Fattah
(1943–2023)
Palestine’s Geographer

A Note to Our Readers

As a year of Israel's catastrophic, merciless assault on Gaza is accompanied by a horrific war in Lebanon, we return to our book and recall standing on a hill looking at the ancient route, Via Maris (the Way of the Sea), that took travelers from Damascus through Gaza to Egypt from the Bronze Age to the nineteenth century. Israel's blockade on Gaza since 2006 prevented us from traveling there, and now only Israeli tanks have free access as the almost unimaginable death toll of Gazans mounts to over 42,000, including, by conservative estimates, 11,000 children. Israeli hostages continue to languish – or die – in Gaza's tunnels when a ceasefire could have secured their release. Sadly, Israel's war on Gaza in its relentless destruction of its rich cultural heritage is not only a war on Gaza's present but on its past. The loss is of a heritage for all humankind. We hope that our own explorations in this book of lost places and hidden memorials offers a glimmer of hope amid this darkness. As we continue to hear the plainsong ringing from the church so patiently restored by the former residents of the destroyed village of Kfar Bir'im, we find new meaning in the words on mosaic tiles nearby: "Return is the Way."

Ramallah, October, 2024


0 10 20 30 40 miles
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 kilometres
LEBANON
SYRIA
Mediterranean Sea
Ras Naqoura
Kfar Bir'im
Golan Heights **
Lake Tiberias
Haifa
Kfar Kanna
Nazereth
Mount Tabor
Musmus
Jenin
Nablus
Jordan
Tel Aviv
WEST BANK*
Manshiya/Jaffa
Ras Karkar
Ramallah
Auja
Amman
Qibya
Bir Nabala
Jib
Latrun/Mini-Israel Park
Jericho
Qasr al Yahud
Jerusalem
GAZA*
Gaza
Ein Gedi
Dead Sea
ISRAEL
JORDAN
N
* Occupied Palestinian Territory
** Occupied Syrian Territory
West Bank Israeli settlements
Israeli Settlements in the West Bank
WEST BANK*
ISRAEL
Jordan
Green Line
Dead Sea
Separation Wall

Introduction

A Small Stone on a Dusty Road

This book is a search for hidden or neglected memorials and places in historic Palestine, now Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and an investigation into what they might tell us about the land and the people who have lived, and are living, on our small slip of earth between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. What have they memorialized and what lies unseen and abandoned – and why? We grapple not only with questions of Israeli resistance to acknowledging the Nakba – the 1948 catastrophe for Palestinians – but also the complicated history of Palestinian commemoration in our own time. These are some of the questions we seek to answer in this book.

When the pandemic began, we joked that we were used to lockdowns and curfews, having lived in the Palestinian city of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank for so long, a lifetime in Raja's case and four decades in Penny's. After the 2002 Israeli military re-invasion of the West Bank, Ramallah was under Israeli military curfew for a whole month so we were, we thought, experienced.

However, as the pandemic months turned into years, our humor inevitably turned sour. In the late summer of 2021, we had been stuck in our Ramallah enclave for far too long. Even excursions outside Ramallah had become fraught with complications. Since the signing of the Declaration of

Principles between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993 and the subsequent 1995 Oslo Accords, the West Bank has been divided into three areas – A, B and C – with Area C, under sole Israeli control, constituting 60 percent of the West Bank and home to ever-expanding Israeli settlements. These divisions were originally planned to last for a five-year interim period leading to a final peace agreement but they remain in force today. And "Oslo," as Palestinians call the whole period in shorthand, has now gone on for three decades with no end in sight.

Since the 2002 re-invasion, Israel has restricted Palestinian movement even more severely, both between the West Bank and Israel, and inside the West Bank itself, installing hundreds of checkpoints and road barriers. In the present tense (and tense it is), our Palestinian enclaves are becoming more and more like ghettos. For us, in this claustrophobic time, travel outside the country had been one of the ways to break our isolation, relishing walks in the Scottish Highlands without any obstructions except for the weather. The pandemic put a stop to that.

Our search began accidentally in the summer of 2021 when we took a walk on an obscure path along the wall separating the West Bank from Israel. It was time to leave Ramallah, even for a day. We decided we must at least take a walk and that short walk started us on a much longer journey that took us on explorations of ancient and contemporary sites that helped us better understand what was taking place in our contested territory. With every visit to a new site, we encountered Israeli attempts to develop a new geography, and the picture of how this was happening became clearer to us. As we discovered, the confinement of Palestinians behind checkpoints is not only intended by Israeli planners and settlers to restrict movement but is also designed to alienate the new generations who have no memory or experience of historic Palestine, and thus are becoming strangers in the land.

With 144 (and counting) Israeli settlements and more than 100 of what Israelis call "outposts" having been built in the West Bank since 1967, it has become harder to find safe areas to walk in our hills and valleys. One must choose paths carefully. That day, we began walking on an obscure, dusty

road leading to Beit Nuba, an agricultural hamlet to the west of Ramallah just on “our side” of the separation (apartheid) wall dividing us in the occupied West Bank from the state of Israel, a structure that Israel began constructing in June 2002 and is now 700 kilometers long. Our friend and companion, the photographer Bassam Almohor, drew our attention to a small, smooth, gray rock erected by the roadside, which he photographed. A Palestinian flag, its colors still bright, along with an image of an AK-47 gun attached to its flagpole, was painted on the left-hand side. The inscription honors the three “martyrs of the Egyptian Arab Army who were martyred in the battle for Latroun, 1967.”

This memorial stone held a story we did not know. What were three Egyptians doing fighting in Latroun in the June 1967 war – that brief war, with its lasting consequences, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Eastern Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip as well as the Golan Heights? That the Egyptian army fought (and lost) in the Sinai, in brutal battles with great loss of life is well known – but what happened in Latroun in the center of the country?

This simple plaque set us off on a journey across historic Palestine, with the sad exception of the Gaza Strip, to which we had no access. We were looking for, and reflecting on, lost, forgotten and hidden memorials, monuments and places, some infused with our personal memories, others from a millennium ago or more. We were curious to discover what was memorialized and what was left unmarked or erased from the landscape of Palestine. What began as short excursions to relieve our sense of confinement developed into an exploration of many lost places and forgotten memorials, raising deeper questions on wider issues relating to the current reality in the small area of the world where we live.

At a time when contested memorials make global headlines – a statue of arch-colonialist Cecil Rhodes was toppled at the University of Cape Town while a statue of Rhodes still stands at Oxford University, despite growing protests – we decided to explore our world, whether the ruins of the past or more recent memorials to events that have faded even from our own intimate recollections.

A memorial stone for three Egyptian soldiers who perished in the 1967 war, on the side of a deserted road near the wall separating the West Bank from Israel.

We began in the first days of 2022, emerging from the lost pandemic years to a Palestine that was both familiar and newly strange. We emerged conscious of our years, feeling older and more vulnerable, and with a haunting sense of time and mortality. “Old men should be explorers,” T. S. Eliot wrote, and (aside from replacing “men” with “people”) we heartily agree. There was much to retrieve and to learn about the forgotten or half-

forgotten memorials of those fallen in our many wars and conflicts, the disappearing or hidden places we only half-know, and that younger generations may not know at all, and the events that are partly lost to memory but can tell us about ourselves and our possible futures. This was not an exercise in nostalgia but a search for a usable past that might take us beyond our fragmented land and occupied lives; always hoping for evidence of the common past in the land that we and our adversary share unequally.

The stories we found were interwoven with our own. Sometimes we chose places and memorials, sometimes they seemed to choose us, as the voices of those lost in war, conflict and, even more painfully, massacres, whispered in our ears. We were especially curious to investigate whether and how the 1948–49 Nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic), that war that erased Palestine and which Israel is yet to recognize, was commemorated among Palestinians in Israel.

Both Palestine's ancient and recent past also accompanied our contemporary wanderings, from Bronze Age ruins of a once-great city at Tell Balata near the city of Nablus (chapter 1) to a haunted mosque in western Jerusalem that only one hundred years ago welcomed worshippers to the shrine and tomb of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (chapter 5).

There is no place where archaeology is more politicized than in Israel. In a nearby Palestinian village that has become the name of a major Israeli checkpoint, we stared into the dark ruins of a sophisticated Bronze Age system of water retrieval and examined a more "recent" building that had been a Byzantine church then mosque then Crusader church (chapter 2): the ruins of Palestine move through the ages. In our own city of Ramallah, we discovered ruins from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine era and wondered at what we did not see in our surroundings (chapter 13).

Our visits also included areas that demonstrate Israel's persistent attempts to bury the Palestinian presence on the land pre-1948, its adamant refusal to recognize the Nakba, and its continuous attempt to create a new geography, such as in the eradication of Manshiya, the once lively quarter

of the Palestinian city of Jaffa near the Mediterranean Sea, which has been obliterated, its ruins concealed by a seaside park (chapter 8).

The loss of our own freedom of movement drew us to the connections Palestine once had with the world around it. At the ruins of Khan al Tujjar (chapter 4), a once major site in the Galilee where caravans from Syria and beyond rested on their travels to the Palestinian coast and on to Cairo, we stepped through weeds and waist-high thorns to discover its neglected ruins, with only a small sign in Hebrew to mark this spot.

And as our explorations drew to a close, we would return to that small gray stone on that dusty road as Israeli newspapers reported startling revelations from a story that had been suppressed for half a century. We later visited the long-hidden burial site of other Egyptian soldiers and discovered what it has become.

There is never just one story to the memorials and places we explore. The very existence of Palestine is replete with contestation and denial. On the way to Jericho, at a place dedicated to the Good Samaritan, the Israeli Civil Administration – the arm of the Israeli occupation that controls our lives and also controls archaeological sites – the small Museum of the Good Samaritan displays beautiful mosaics. Most have been taken from the territories occupied in the June war in 1967, some from the Gaza Strip, some from Hebron and other sites in the West Bank. They are displayed without context. What we can perhaps hope for is that our journeys in this book provide pathways to understanding that speak to the diverse groups who have lived, and are living, in our common world.

PART ONE

Palestine’s Pasts, Our Past and a Troubled Present

I am against boys becoming
heroes at ten …
And yet …
Rashid Hussein, “Opposition”

1

Memorials of the Fallen, Ruins of a Great City: Nablus

We had not been to Nablus, only thirty-five kilometers from Ramallah, for more than two years. Perhaps no city in the occupied West Bank has more layers of history – whether forgotten, half-remembered or memorialized – than the ancient city of Nablus. This bustling hub of merchants and manufacturers has a chronicle of habitation that stretches back to the Bronze Age, 5,000 years ago. Compared to Nablus, Ramallah is a parvenu city (some would say a village), founded in its present incarnation only in the mid-sixteenth century by the Christian Haddad family fleeing a feud in Transjordan. In contrast, Nablus bears the weight of its many pasts: as a Roman city, an Islamic city, a Crusader conquest, and a trading and commercial center for the Levant under the Ottoman Empire. Within our comparatively brief lifetime, Nablus has remained attractive for its vital Old City, its soap factories and its small industries. It also has a well-deserved reputation as a center of resistance to the Israeli occupation. On our last visit in 2019, we sat in a Nablus public garden on a moonlit night, listening to international and local writers in a session of the Palestine Festival of Literature. We did not know then that this treasured festival would not make its annual appearance during the pandemic years or that we would be absent for so long.

As we traveled along the congested Highway 60, we were flooded with memories of the old road to Nablus, winding through near pristine hills and agricultural landscapes that have almost vanished as sprawling Israeli settlements have been greatly expanded, and new settlements founded. Were we simply succumbing to that common affliction of an older generation – nostalgia for past times and a better world? No, it was not just that, as we quickly found out when we approached the Palestinian town of Hawara near the entrance to Nablus. The drastic transformation of the landscape was still occurring all around us in the present tense and with profound implications for the future. On both sides of Hawara, Israeli bulldozers were at work gouging out the hills in a massive project to construct a four-lane bypass road over the town – the Hawara Bypass – connecting Israeli settlements from the west to the east.

Building bypass roads and tunnels for Israeli settlers and confiscating Palestinian land is the continuing story of the development of Highway 60. Perhaps most notorious is the “tunnel road” section near Bethlehem and Beit Jala in the southern West Bank, a four-lane “underpass” built on confiscated Palestinian land where the same Palestinians landowners, carrying West Bank identity cards, are forbidden to drive. Highway 60 is called by some Israelis “the way of the patriarchs,” and it makes apartheid visible as it destroys the land and hills we once knew.

Since our visit, Hawara residents had endured a pogrom – the term used by the Israeli army commander of the area – when, on February 23, 2023, some 400 settlers, mainly from the nearby Israeli settlement of Har Bracha (Hebrew for “hill of blessing”), went on a five-hour, late-night rampage of revenge for two settlers shot and killed by Palestinian militants. The settlers were not stopped by the Israeli army or police. One Palestinian was killed and some 100 Hawara residents were injured, including four who were left in a serious condition. At least fifteen houses were burned, one with the family still inside.

Given what we saw on our drive through the town, we could perhaps have anticipated these bitter events, but, as we passed the Israeli settlement of Elon Moreh, we were reminded of a more hopeful period, in 1978. At

that time, Raja, just back from his law studies in the UK and working with colleagues on the founding of the first Palestinian human rights organization, Al Haq (then Law in the Service of Man), was assiduously following the progress of the Elon Moreh case at the Israeli High Court, where Palestinians were petitioning the court to rule on the legality of the Israeli government's acquiring of privately owned Palestinian land through requisition for military purposes. In this case, the High Court's ruling in favor of the Palestinians merely caused the government to change tactics, adopting a method whereby lands they wanted for settlement were first declared to be state land. The success of the case provided only short-lived hope, as the sprawling Elon Moreh settlement attests.

So it is no wonder that we strive to remember how it once was, not so long ago – not that it was untroubled even then. During the first Palestinian intifada, Raja recalled accompanying Noam Chomsky on a visit to Beita, an embattled Palestinian village. It was early April 1988 and the hills were awash with spring flowers. Chomsky was there to speak to the villagers about a terrible incident that had just taken place, when Jewish teenagers from the same Elon Moreh settlement, hiking in a nearby valley, were confronted by Palestinians from Beita throwing stones, ubiquitous in Palestine, to protect their village. A settler had been injured by gunfire and Palestinians were blamed. It later emerged that the bullet had been fired by one of the men guarding the settlers. But that was after the army had invaded the village, dynamited fourteen houses, killed a farmer and a sixteen-year-old boy, and arrested all the males of the village, deporting several to Lebanon. Chomsky listened attentively and was saddened but not surprised. He had anticipated that the increased rate of settlement building would place the occupier and the occupied, the land confiscators and those who had lost their land, physically close together, with predictable results.

To lighten the mood, Raja had suggested that Noam look up to the beauty of the hills after the winter rain, but to no avail. Chomsky, a man of words, could not really see the natural world. The spring loveliness passed him by entirely. At that time, walking in the hills was our escape from the human miseries of occupation. How many human lives and how many

futures would have been preserved – along with the natural world – had the Israeli government properly assessed the Elon Moreh case and prevented further settlements. Thousands have died since, and so here we were, on our way to see how Palestinians memorialize their dead in Nablus.

We stood silently before our first memorial in Nablus's Old City, mesmerized. It was a triptych, eerily recalling the three-paneled paintings that graced altars in Byzantine or Renaissance churches. Those religious works, with their striking figures in luminous colors on a shining gold background, often portrayed the martyrs of the church and their suffering for Christ. In Nablus's Old City, on a March day in 2022, we stood looking at three posters featuring black and white photographs of the martyrs of Nablus, those who had suffered for their city and their people. This altar was simply a wall of white stone bricks with a neat black fence protecting it. Printed over the posters was a Quranic verse, the *surat l-ahzab.* An English translation is:

> Among the believers are men who were true to their covenant with God; some of them have fulfilled their vow by death, and some are still awaiting, and they have not changed in the least.

This contemporary altar was in the Aryon quarter of the Old City. We had wended our way through the packed narrow streets, redolent with smells of sweets and spices and the sound of merchants calling out their wares. Although Bassam Almohor, our companion and photographer, knew the way and guided us, it had been a long time since we were in a crowd and we both felt somewhat dazed and weary. Even our stop for a slice of Nablus *kanafeh* – a delicacy of spun pastry and white cheese soaked in a sweet syrup – was not restorative, as we stood, elbow to elbow, eating the delicious treat in an alley packed with Nabulsi consumers.

The Aryon quarter was quieter, and its center, Sahet al Tut (Mulberry Square) was even more peaceful. Only a boy playing with a rambunctious puppy broke the silence. This had not been the case, however, in April 2002 during Israel's re-invasion of Palestinian towns during the second intifada.

The Old City of Nablus was a particular target: both Palestinian militants and civilians perished during a ten-day curfew, and homes and historic buildings, including a Byzantine basilica and an Ottoman-era palace, were demolished or damaged. The Aryon quarter was not spared: an Israeli tank had plowed through the Shuabi family home, killing six family members. We turned and looked at the house where it had happened, opposite the triptych. The plaque listed the names of those murdered there with the somber message “Never forgive, never forget.” For us, not forgetting was key to our exploration, but what to make of the memories was a question we had not yet answered.

Turning back to our Nablus altar, we contemplated the three panels. The first consisted of five photographs: four young men, perhaps in their late teens, and, at the bottom, one who could only be described as a boy. “So young, and look at their clothes and their hairstyles,” Penny said. “These must be from the first intifada.” And then she added, softly, “They are the only martyrs not bearing arms.” Raja ruefully recalled an observation by the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti: “Living people grow old, but martyrs grow younger.”

A triptych of posters memorializing young men – martyrs – who perished during the first and second Palestinian intifadas and in the present years, Old City of Nablus.

Neither of us was as young as these five when the intifada erupted in December 1987 but the events of those years weave in and out of our

memories as a time that shaped us and gave us hope for the future. It was a time of mass participation: with hundreds of other women, Penny, somewhat fearful but clutching a friend's arm, marched several times through Ramallah's occupied city. At the temporary headquarters in Ramallah of shuttered Birzeit University, she wrote statements and assisted in the planning and holding of an international conference in Jerusalem on "Twenty Years of Occupation." At Al Haq, Raja worked with colleagues to document human rights violations and to hold another notable conference in Jerusalem, bringing together international and local scholars to discuss international law and the administration of occupied territories. Both of these gatherings looked toward a future of Palestinian independence: surely the mass civil resistance to twenty years of occupation heralded an end to the suffering of a people? Three decades later, we look at the poster of these young people who sacrificed their lives for that independence and still cannot see an end.

Two older men were sitting in the sun on a bench under the triptych, their backs supported by the wall. They were smoking nergila, the fragrant water-pipe highly favored by Nabulsis, and silently regarding us, wondering what we were up to. They kept their thoughts to themselves, looking as though they had seen it all and nothing now could possibly disturb them. Although we were loath to intrude on their peace we asked them if the central image on the wall was indeed from the second intifada. "Yes," one of them said, with a resigned tone of voice, pointing to it. "That is from the second intifada."

It is perhaps telling that this image of the second intifada foregrounds not those many ordinary young men who perished in the violence, but, in the words of the poster, the "leader." Muhammed Yusef Zakarneh, is holding a rifle against his chest, the gun almost bigger than he is. He is flanked by the faces of two older men, perhaps his own leaders. The Dome of the Rock gleams in the background. The preponderance of both rifles and religious iconography distinguishes the posters of the second intifada.

Some disturbing memories of that period still haunt us. It is impossible to forget the spring of 2002. That March, Israeli civilians perished in a

series of nine Palestinian suicide bombings, acts of desperation by young Palestinian men and women who knew only occupation. Then, on March 29, we huddled at home while Israeli tanks rolled into Ramallah and other Palestinian towns in a massive incursion that wreaked havoc in our city, and our life, destroying so many livelihoods and hopes. Hundreds of Palestinians lost their lives. Raja wrote of our experience during the siege in his book, *When the Bulbul Stopped Singing.*

Our role in this disastrous second intifada, with its armed resistance – better described as rudimentary militias facing one of the most powerful armies in the world – was strikingly different to the first. Indeed, it was hardly a role: we were simply civilians whose only mission was to watch the horrors taking place and survive as best we could. Remembering earlier mass civilian protests, Penny wrote a piece with a colleague from the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University with the title: "Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone?"

The third image of the triptych, although closer to us in time, seemed more distant from our lives and experiences, telling us, again, something about the course of resistance in Palestine in these most recent, and complicated, years. We did not know the names of the young men pictured; we did not know when and how they had perished. As we walked through the quarter, we found more posters of martyrs placed on the stone walls. Our thoughts returned to the chilling words that end the Quranic inscription: "some are still awaiting."

And indeed, some await and death comes to them. A week after our visit, on March 15, as we were writing up our experiences in Nablus, Israeli soldiers shot and killed sixteen-year-old Nader Haithem Rayan, during a dawn raid on the Balata refugee camp in Nablus, the most populous refugee camp in the West Bank and home to about 33,000 Palestinians who lost their original homes in Jaffa and its surrounding villages in 1948. The same day, a young man in Qalandia refugee camp near Ramallah perished by army fire, as did twenty-seven-year-old Sanad Al Harbed, a father of four children, during an Israeli army dawn raid in Rafat in the Naqab desert. And so many more since that time, as young militants from the city and

surrounding refugee camps increasingly confront the Israeli army not with stones but with firearms.

But that day in Nablus, we could not bear considering future roll calls of the fallen. Instead, we turned to the past, the war dead from an older conflict. Near an abandoned soccer field and a technical school, at the outskirts of the city, the Iraqi soldiers who perished in 1948 – our Nakba – rest in orderly rows of tombstones. A plinth under the cypress trees reads "Memorial to the martyrs of the Iraqi army." There are several hundred graves, a minority with the names of the fallen, while most simply read "martyr" and the date of death. All have the *fatiha*, the opening verse of the Quran, at their head and all are dated after May 15, 1948, when the new state of Israel was declared and Arab armies entered Palestine.

In Nablus, the Iraqi Expeditionary Force took over from Jordan's Arab Legion (commanded by the British officer Glubb Pasha) on May 22 and Nablus became the Iraqi headquarters. They successfully repulsed an Israeli attack on Jenin in June (there is an Iraqi war cemetery there as well), but in the months to come the Force did not go on the offensive. Indeed, as historian Charles Tripp has noted, this period was characterized by embittered soldiers by the phrase *Maku awamir* (no orders). Walking along the somber rows of graves, we found that most of the fallen died in June and July 1948, simply, it seems, to preserve the Iraqi positions; forgotten soldiers in an obscure corner of the war that changed Palestinian lives so drastically. Intriguingly, there is one grave of a martyr from Palestine itself, dated February 1949. The Iraqi government would sign an armistice agreement with Israel a month later. What would the status of this forgotten cemetery have been had the fighting of these men succeeded in changing the course of the war?

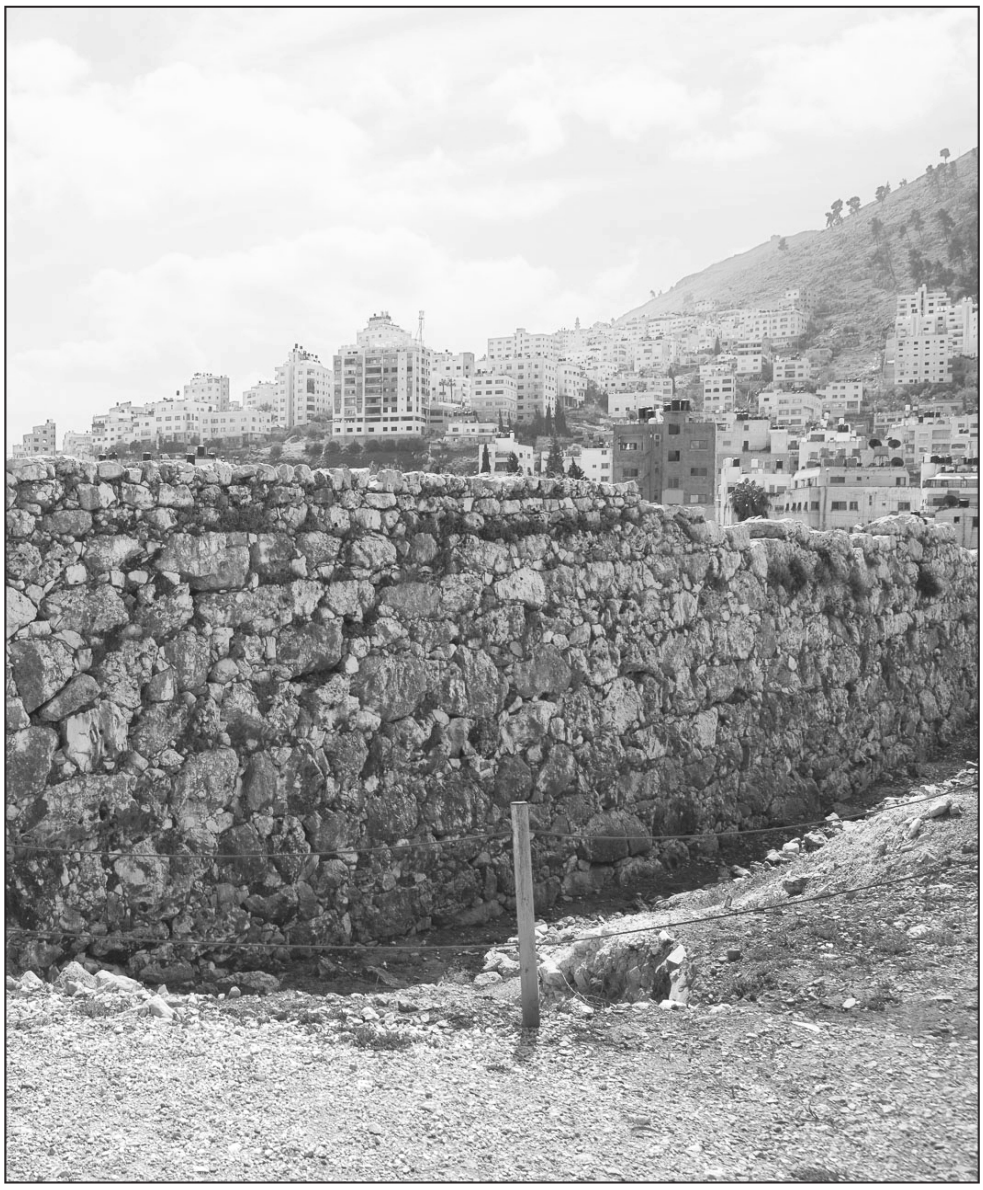
These young men were not the only soldiers who had been forgotten. On a busy Nablus intersection, hidden by several straggly palm trees and a stone wall, we found a memorial to Jordanian soldiers who fell in Nablus during a later war: the 1967 war that marked the beginning of the dismal period in our life that began with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. An elevated grave stood in a patch of weeds, the resting place of

a Jordanian commander and three of his comrades who fell in the battle of Wadi al Touffah (the Valley of Apples) near Nablus. A nondescript stone plaque from the Nablus municipality commemorated this small enclave, which seemed largely unvisited, although the municipality did hold a small commemorative event in 2020. On a nearby busy traffic circle, a faceless soldier had been painted in black paint, flanked by Jordanian and Palestinian flags.

We could wander among the dead no longer and found our way to a site that whispered not of the loss of young men, but of lost civilizations. Tell Balata, once the site of a flourishing Middle Bronze Age city, was where we would end our visit to Nablus.

We entered the Tell Balata Archaeological Park through a side entrance after parking near the orchards of contemporary Balata, once a village, now incorporated as a suburb of Nablus, with the inevitable concrete tower blocks rising above its orchards. In Palestine, names can continue for thousands of years while human populations flow through their sites.

There was a sign for visitors with entrance fees to the park, but there was no one at the booth – and indeed no one in sight. We walked along an inviting path, with red anemones growing near a stone wall that a sign identified as the imperial fortress, all that was left of what was once an imposing structure. At another entrance, we finally found a pleasant young man who provided us with tickets.



The remains of the wall surrounding the great Bronze Age city of Tell Balata with the town of Balata in the background, near Nablus.

We wandered along paths marked by the occasional sign, and an arrow directing visitors to sites while urging them to keep away from fragile ruins. It was eerie being the only people at this important place and there was a feeling as of a half-finished project. Archaeologists from the Palestinian Authority and the University of Leiden, with support from the Netherlands

and UNESCO, worked for four years (2010–14) to develop the site and make it legible to visitors – but, as is all too common in Palestine, work must have halted when international funding was exhausted. Reliance on international donors in the years since the Oslo Accords has extended from the Palestinian Authority to universities and non-governmental organizations to time-bound initiatives like the Tell Balata project.

Back at the entrance, the young man told us there was a staff member who could play a film about Tell Balata. When a young woman flicked a switch, we sat in the darkened room among empty chairs and watched a well-constructed, indeed slick, film that conveyed the past grandeur of the ancient city and the present achievements of its (partial) restoration. Tell Balata, the narrator said in a deep voice, is the “lost queen of Palestine.” On the spring day of our visit, the stone ruins of the lost queen shone in the spring sunlight but we were the only witnesses.

As we left Nablus, Bassam pointed out another gouged hill that had escaped our notice. “A new bus station for settlers,” he said grimly. There is a new imperium being built near Nablus. The stones of Tell Balata whisper of the fate of other imperiums and we hold on to our memories of the living but fragile anemones emerging from the cracks in that ancient wall.

2

Not Just a Checkpoint: Jib and Bir Nabala

A pleasant breeze from the Mediterranean Sea cooled us on a late afternoon in May as we stood on a hill surrounded by excavations of a Bronze and Iron Age city. The hill sits at the top of the contemporary Palestinian village of Jib, thirteen kilometers southwest of Ramallah and ten kilometers north of Jerusalem. The site has been identified by archaeologists as ancient Gibeon, where, according to biblical accounts, Joshua made the sun stand still; it was first inhabited some 5,000 years ago. Gibeon and Jib are close in name but the Palestinian village that inherited this whisper of glory and a long history of habitation, has become, in today's common parlance, synonymous with the name of an infamous checkpoint that leaves the West Bank and its Palestinian communities on both sides of the divide. Across the way and beyond that checkpoint, we could see the Israeli settlement of East Givon. We had come to this impressive archaeological site not only to wonder at the evidence of its long past, but also to understand the plight of the beleaguered Palestinian villagers living nearby.

"Shall we go through Jib or the DCO?" is a frequent query these days for those driving back from Jerusalem to Ramallah. The "choice" is between two checkpoints: a third possibility, the nearer Qalandia checkpoint, is automatically ruled out as being too miserable and congested.

The DCO – the District Coordinating Office of the Israeli Civil Administration – graces the eastern entrance to Ramallah. Its checkpoint is usually unmanned but the winding road is often crowded with traffic on route to both the nearby Beit El settlement and to our town. Jib, on the western side, is a checkpoint with a set of rules for entrances and exits. Although the exit from Jib also leads to other parts of the occupied West Bank, the checkpoint marks a new boundary between Palestinian towns and villages and Israeli settlements. On the settlement side, the highway is open to Jerusalem and the coast but is forbidden to Palestinians holding Palestinian (West Bank) identity cards. Palestinian laborers with permits to work in Israel may use the checkpoint, but only on foot. VIPs from international organizations and prominent Palestinian businesspeople often have permits to pass, and residents of a Jib neighborhood with agricultural land on the other side may sometimes pass. For the rest, exit from Jib is forbidden, while entrance to Jib through the checkpoint is permitted for Palestinians with Jerusalem residency. All in all, it is dizzyingly complicated.

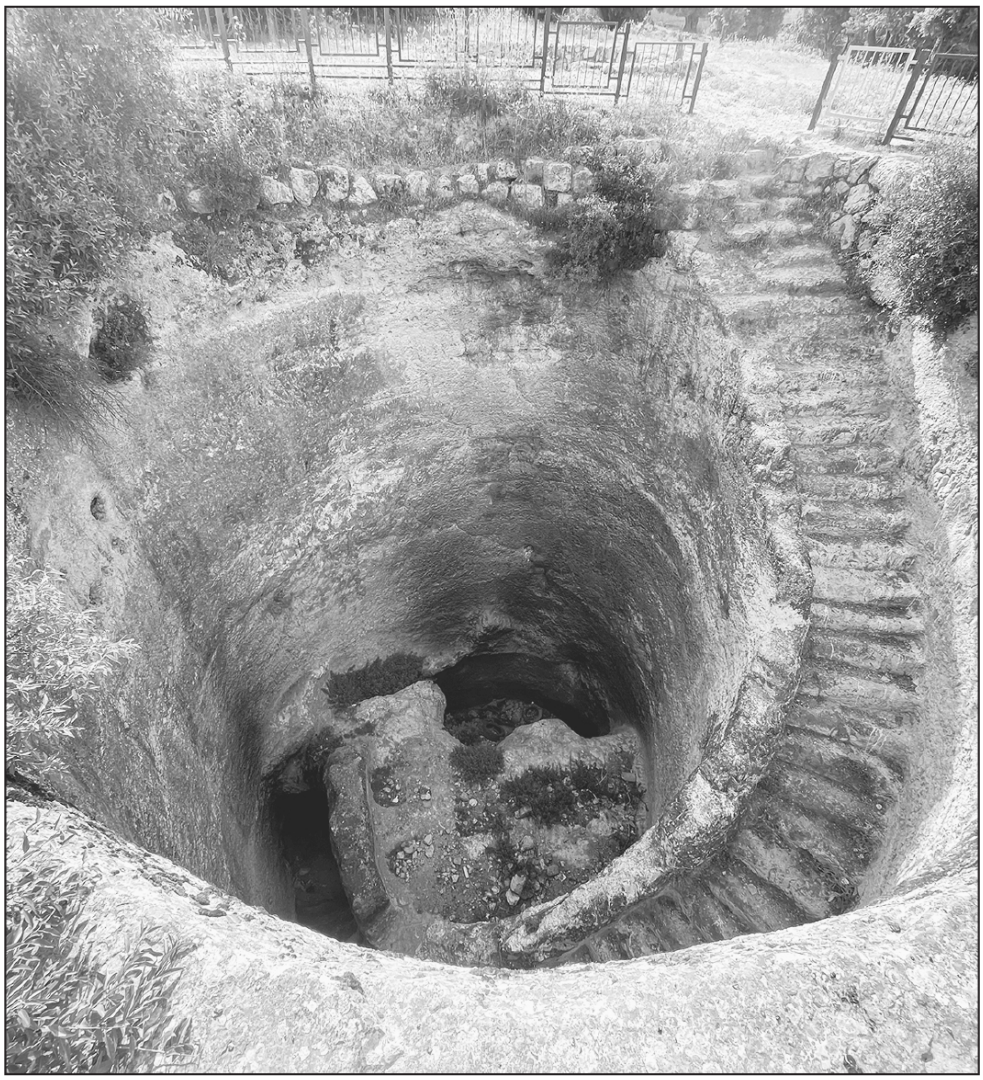
As we surveyed this new “border point” from our hillside vantage point, we remembered how in the past we were able to make our voices heard by challenging those staffing the checkpoints. It was sometimes possible to address the reserve soldiers on duty and alert them to the folly and tragedy of what they were being made to do in obstructing movement for the Palestinians. Now, with the checkpoint staffed by Israeli military border police and private security staff, that limited interaction has become impossible.

We wearily exited the checkpoint and entered “our side,” encountering a scattering of village houses and shops along the main road, mostly catering to commuters. Some have borrowed names from grander establishments – one of them is called Zara – and others beckon drivers with Italian pizzas. In the distance we could see agricultural fields with a reputation for the tastiest Armenian cucumbers, long and slender, crisp and sweet, and in fact not cucumbers at all but a kind of musk melon. The road is always noisy,

with the barking of an ever-present number of stray dogs and the nerve-wracking screeching of trucks and transit vans.

Al-Jib is a Palestinian village with a population of around 4,500 and an ancient past that we wanted to understand. We had been fortunate to visit the archaeological ruins on the hill above the current village ten years ago (everything seems to be a decade away now) with Nazmi Jubeh, a professor of history at Birzeit University and a co-founder of Riwaq, the Ramallah-based Center for Architectural Conservation.

“Jib,” Nazmi had told us, pointing to its Bronze Age water system, “was once a more important city than Jerusalem.” As we stretched our minds back to the Bronze and Iron Ages, Nazmi took us through the sophisticated water system and, for those with other thirsts, the large-scale storage and export of wine in the Iron Age. That attractive version of the city existed in the most cosmopolitan periods of its more than 3,000-year history. Given the waves of invasion and destruction suffered by other cities in the Near East in this period, the observation by American archaeologist James Pritchard that “the Gibeonites managed to live in peace for a good portion of their long history” could perhaps provide us with a lens through which to contemplate – and perhaps disrupt – the choking reality of the present.



Steps leading to the sophisticated water system – and wine storage area – of a Bronze and Iron Age city on the hill above the village of Jib.

Once upon a time, the village of Jib had struck travelers as a special place. Pritchard tells us that a British traveler, Edward Robinson, visited “el-Jib and its rocky eminence” on May 5, 1838. Perhaps partly because he had come to Jib after a difficult night camped on the eastern slopes of the central highlands of the West Bank, where he had been plagued by fleas, barking dogs and mosquitos, on seeing the “beautiful” fertile plain below this village on a hill he wrote:

> The hill may be said to stand in the midst of a basin, composed of broad valleys or plains, cultivated and full of grain, vineyards, and orchards of olive and fig trees. It was decidedly the finest part of Palestine that I had yet seen.

Like many western travelers of that era and beyond, with the Bible as their guide, Robinson was convinced that Jib was ancient Gibeon. And indeed this was the conclusion from the excavations we were now viewing, conducted by Pritchard, his colleagues and around one hundred villagers over three summers (1956–59). Pritchard was not free of orientalist bias when he described Jib in the 1950s as a "self-contained island of the past, where Arabs live today much as they did in the Middle Ages." (One wonders how this fits with his observation of the daily bus to Jerusalem and the "ubiquitous gasoline stove.") Still, we were keen to know, whether Gibeon or Jib, that an ancient city had once stood here.

The hill with its ruins was still beautiful. Several families and a courting couple from the village sat peacefully under the olive trees, one of them so aged that we gazed at it in delight before we turned and peered down ancient steps to the rock-hewn caves far below, where water was once brought from a spring in the valley. A 3,000-year-old intricate water system was enough of a marvel but we also enjoyed the wine vats that could store about 115,000 liters at a time. Water and wine amid rich agricultural lands: no wonder Jib/Gibeon flourished. Bassam descended the steps into the water system to snap even more photos.

These excavations were remarkable, but, as we walked along a path on the eastern side of the hill, we confronted evidence of another kind of archaeology with a less elevated purpose. In August 2007, a team from a Palestinian NGO working on cultural preservation visited a ruin near Jib and found a young Israeli archaeologist, working under the aegis of Israel's Civil Administration Department of Archaeology ("civil" being a misnomer here as the Administration is under military control), who said he was engaged in "salvage archaeology" in preparation for the construction of the wall that would separate Jib from the Israeli settlements to the west. We saw

several ancient olive presses uncovered in this (illegal) excavation, but all other objects have vanished.

We sat on a stone terrace, looking down on the wide expanse of planted fields in the valley to our east, a symphony of green. The valley is bordered to the east by the wall, separating it from other Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhoods. Significantly, these lands of Jib and Bir Nabala are classified as Area C, thus permanent buildings are forbidden and only small temporary structures dot the landscape. To the south we could see another section of the wall, snaking under a large mosque called Nabi Samuel, the purported burial place of the Prophet Samuel, which sits on a high peak and dominates the Jerusalem skyline. Israel planned the wall so that the mosque would be left on what can only be described as the “settlement side” of the West Bank. Hidden from our view – and indeed invisible from any ground angle – is the adjacent Palestinian community of Nebi Samwil, whose residents exist in a shifting regime of permits and restrictions. These unfortunate people have the double burden of their village and its lands being declared Area C while also residing in an Israeli-imposed “national park” that now surrounds the mosque and tomb. Down below, a sizable portion of the land of Jib also lies to the west of the checkpoint.

We could also see the flourishing settlements of Givon (Givon HaHadasha or New Givon) and East Givon (Givon Camp) and make out the skyline of the large settlement of Givat Zeev to the west. The three settlements are situated along a highway connected to Jerusalem that also descends to the coast, an alternative route to the older, once quite narrow, road called Bab al Wad, which was the sole road to Jerusalem from the coast before 1967 and which was difficult for Zionist/Israeli forces to secure during the fighting in 1948. A new geography has been created with the wall, and the web of new roads built to connect Israeli settlements with Jerusalem, but this severs Palestinian villages west of Jib from Palestinian communities east of the wall, and Jib and Bir Nabala from any of their Jerusalem neighbors.

Both of us could remember, in the early 1980s, when Givat Zeev, the first of these settlements, did not exist – instead a wetland had flourished

there. Was it simply nostalgia to recall now the struggle of Al Haq and its staff and volunteers to block the building of this illegal settlement on Palestinian land? We sincerely believed then that it would be possible. We smiled briefly as we remembered our friend and colleague, historian Roger Heacock, sitting in front of an Israeli bulldozer and being lifted in the air by the same before being unceremoniously dumped to the side. At the time we did not understand why Israel was struggling so relentlessly to create this new geography. Now it was all laid out before us.

We shook ourselves as we arose, not from the fragrant bits of thyme that clung to our clothes but from the cruel intricacies of plans over decades that had destroyed Palestinian lives and livelihoods. We wanted to end our visit on a more pleasant note and continued along the ridge of the hill to Jib's Old City, the historic core of the village, now uninhabited but carefully renovated by Riwaq in 2017, with the hope of the site becoming a center for community activities.

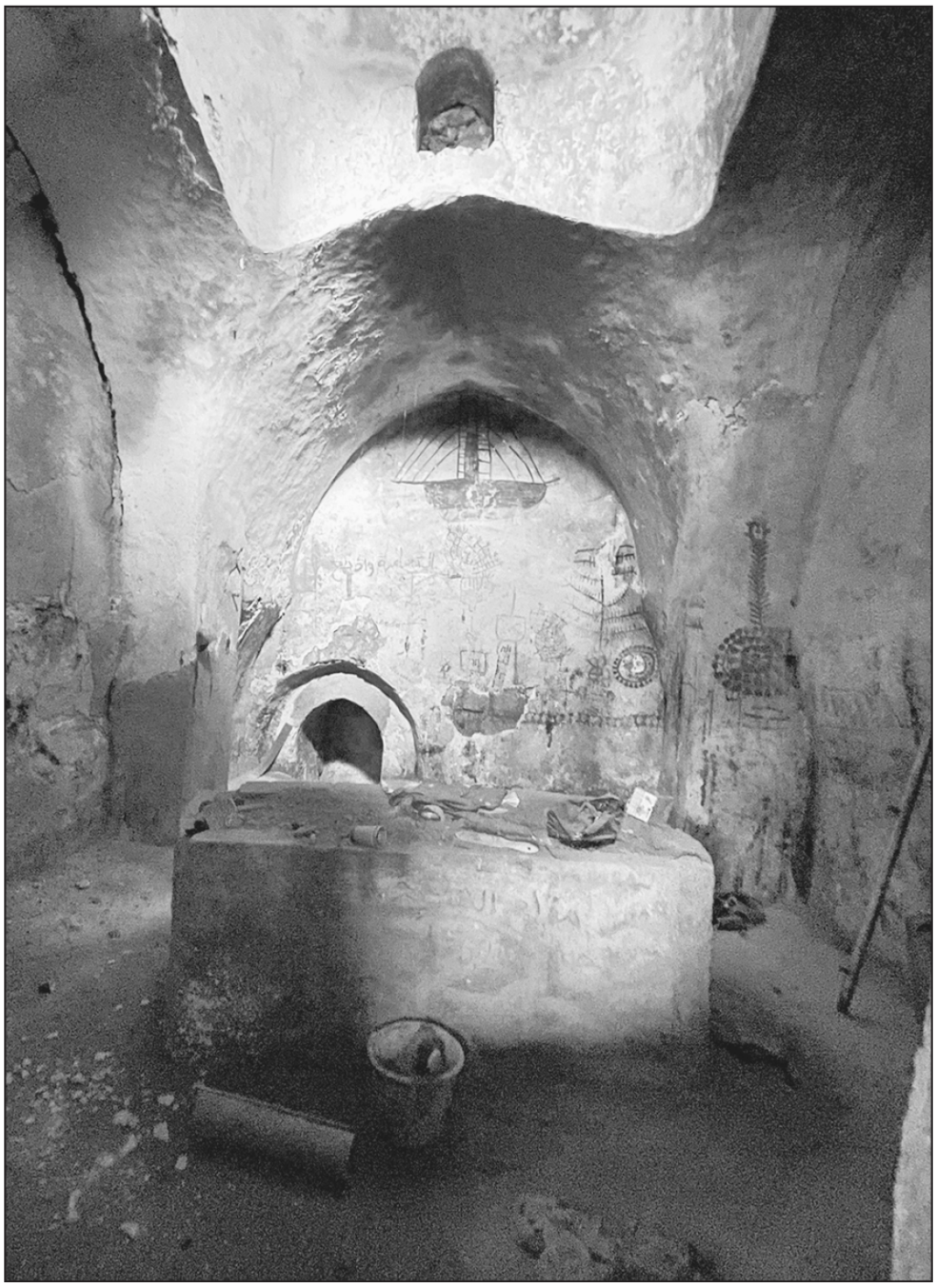
At the entrance, a standing stone arch marked a building with multiple reconstructions, Byzantine, Umayyad and Crusader, giving a sense of the city's long past. We walked on and saw that a number of the low stone houses from Ottoman and Mandate times had been restored. A few dangling signs indicated plans, at least, for community centers and activities for children, but the buildings themselves were deserted.

At the edge of the village, we found a *maqam*, a sheikh or saint's tomb, a domed structure with its interior peaceful and clean. On the wall, there was a mysterious small painting in blue of a sailing ship. When we emerged, boys suddenly appeared – as they often do – shouting cheerfully at each other. We asked them the name of the sheikh and they responded in a chorus: "Sheikh Hamid." We should not have doubted their nine-year-old wisdom but we later checked with Nazmi Jubeh and indeed it was the tomb of Sheikh Hamid, whose body, according to legend, flew to Jib upon his death. But now it was these boys who were flying, springing from roof to roof with joyful energy. And then – parkour! – a thin boy leapt off a high roof and tower and another jumped from the roof of the *maqam.*

We descended the hill thinking of boys flying through the air – not an antidote to the profound lack of freedom of movement for their families but a moment of joy nonetheless.

The bustling stores along the road were more like an American strip mall than a village community. But then, as we reached the turning to Ramallah, we saw the long continuation of the road through to the Jerusalem-area town of Bir Nabala, almost deserted, its buildings shuttered and dusty. There was another part of the story of this locked enclave. We took a deep breath and drove along the Bir Nabala Road to nowhere.

As we made our way through the deserted streets, we saw the sign for the Hanging Gardens Wedding Hall, now faded, and the building's broken windows, and its stone front covered with dust. It was once one of three successful wedding venues in Bir Nabala, including the equally prosperous A Nabali Wedding Hall. Jerusalemites came to marry in these places, which offered music, food and festivities at a reasonable price in this once bustling suburb of eastern Jerusalem. But, in 2005, Israel began constructing a new separation barrier and today Bir Nabala is a fenced-in enclave.



Tomb of a Muslim saint, Sheikh Hamid, with a
painting of a mysterious sailing ship, Old City of Jib.

Musa Sabah, the owner of the Hanging Gardens, which had two wedding halls, each equipped to accommodate hundreds of guests, described the effects of the wall on his thriving business to a researcher

from the Israeli human rights organization B'tselem: "It was like when you get dementia," he said. Sabah, who with his brother had invested almost a million dollars in the business, lost everything. He moved to a small house with his five children, where he sat, watching, over and over, wedding videos from better days: "They were happy times. May God bring them back." But then he hesitated and said to the researcher, "stop." "Enough."

The name of his defunct hall evokes the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the world in ancient times. And it seems to be a popular name for wedding venues in more exotic places – the Philippines and Bali for example – as well as in the more mundane Rockford, Illinois. Scholars dispute whether the ancient Hanging Gardens, usually dated to around 600 BCE, actually existed in Babylon. Our shuttered Hanging Gardens is quickly becoming a ruin where people may well ponder whether it existed and what happened to the community that surrounded it.

Our melancholy journey along the road ended abruptly as the four-meter-high wall rose before us – the tall cement slabs topped with barbed wire. It loomed like a terrible punishment brought down on the inhabitants of this enclave. A crane on the other side of the wall cut through the sky above. On that side, the Atarot industrial zone now boasts an Israeli shopping mall, and a new neighborhood for Orthodox Jews is also underway. We could just hear the sound of the heavy traffic beyond the wall that passes by yet another checkpoint, Qalandia, where only Palestinians with Jerusalem identity cards, permits or, sometimes, proof of old age, can pass from Ramallah and other West Bank locations to Jerusalem.

Our side of the wall offered no passage through, although someone had painted a door with a large "EXIT" on it and "Al Quds" (Jerusalem) written below. An adjacent sign in bold yellow paint read "No More Fear," and then, in black, "Build Your Wall, We Will Overcome." "Most of the slogans are in English," Penny observed. "But who will read them?" Raja noted only one in Arabic: "Al Quds lana" (Jerusalem is ours).

We walked on the dusty path by the wall, deserted except for several smashed cars, a torn mattress and assorted litter. A row of shops – several garages and tool shops – showed no sign of life. But then we came upon a

house with a gate leading to a neat garden and a friendly couple said hello. We asked them if they lived there and they looked amused. “No, no, this is our father’s house and we are repairing the lock. Otherwise, everything will be looted.”

Perhaps no one really lives in this part of Bir Nabala any more, we thought. But then we saw a herd of black goats huddled against the wall, probably belonging to a Bedouin herder from one of the Bir Nabala tribes. The bleating of the goats was a welcome sign of life.

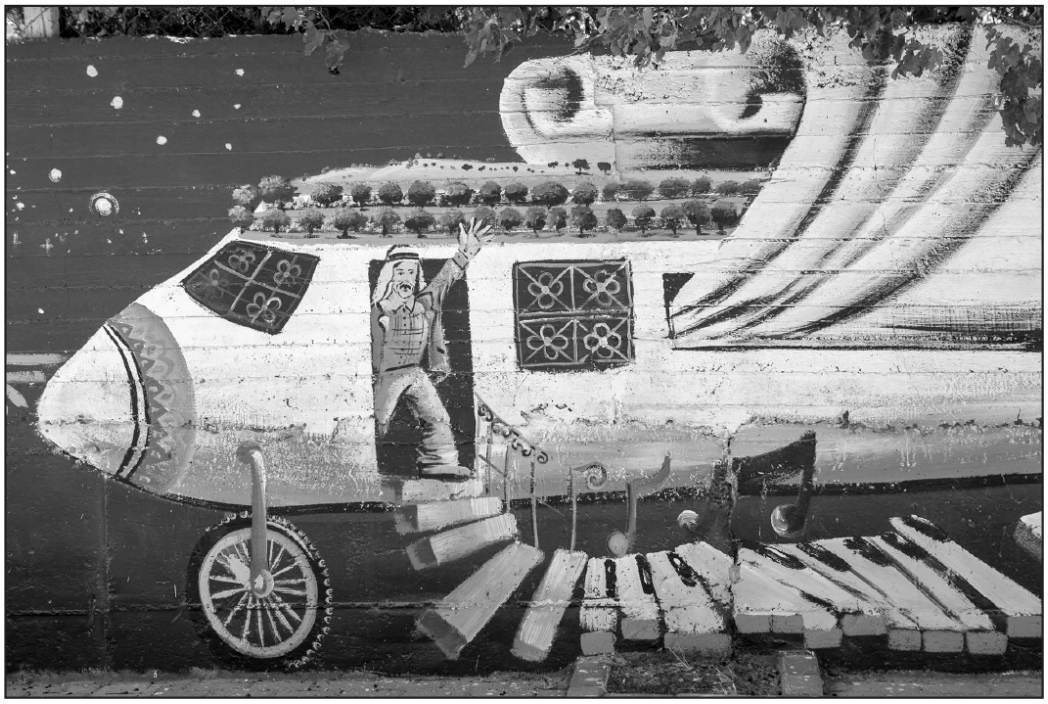
And then, right next to the wall, a man and a small boy emerged from a darkened doorway. At first the man was hesitant to speak to us and the boy darted behind a shabby car but then he said, matter-of-factly, that he had spent twenty-six years in an Israeli prison only to come to this larger prison. He told us that he had a Jerusalem identity card but the detour to get to Jerusalem was far too long. He clearly did not want us to ask him more details about his life, this loner by the wall with a story he did not really want to tell. As we returned on the deserted road, a broken sign propped up by the side of the road proclaimed “Bir Nabala” in English and in Arabic of a once elegant script.

Driving back to Ramallah, we paused, and Bassam took a photo of a locked metal door on the wall, which seemed to accompany us wherever we went. We decided not to continue to Ramallah but to turn to Qalandia village, another Palestinian community whose name has become a checkpoint and who shares with Jib and Bir Nabala the severing from Jerusalem.

Still, a note of defiance. “Welcome to Qalandia, the northern entrance to Jerusalem,” in prominent neon letters graces an arch leading to this third choked village. With 98 percent of its land classified as Area C, Qalandia has been no stranger to hard times but the roughly one thousand villagers managed to find work in Jerusalem and elsewhere prior to the construction of the wall.

The main street of the village is still lined with attractive stone homes, and one impressive Ottoman-era palace has been converted into a community center. But driving beyond the main road into the olive

orchards, we counted seven piles of rubble from homes demolished by Israel, presumably as collective punishment for families with a member who had been convicted of an attack on Israeli forces.



A mural in Qalandia village recalling the once nearby Qalandia airport that served Palestinians until 1967. The village's access to Jerusalem is blocked by the wall.

A decade ago, in 2012, with the wall already erected, Riwaq and other Palestinian cultural institutions launched the first edition of Qalandia International, a festival that brought artists, performers, musicians and a sizable audience, including us, to the village. Perhaps we were under the illusion that art and our defiance could bring down the cold cement of the wall, but at least we were there in solidarity. Now the two of us were back with only our friend Bassam, to remember, reflect, photograph and write about what we saw and felt.

And then a striking wall mural lifted our spirits. Qalandia is not only the name of this village, that checkpoint and a refugee camp – it was once the popular name for the now defunct Jerusalem airport, built by the British in

1920 as a military airport and a civilian airport from 1938 to 1967, serving the Palestinian community. On this more friendly wall, a colorful plane lifts off, its top decorated with a row of olive trees and with flowers trailing in its wake. A man in a keffiyeh at the door waves, welcoming everyone aboard.

3

Water, Borders and Baptisms: The Jordan Valley

We left for the Jordan Valley just after the freezing last days of March, the coldest since 1912. The temperature in the valley's main town, Jericho, was a mild twenty-three degrees in contrast to a chilly ten in Ramallah. We took a steep curving road down through a rugged stone landscape with much more striking scenery than the quicker four-lane highway that is the direct route. Islets of red poppies and carpets of greenery covered the hills. We were on our way to visit the Eco Center in the small hamlet of Auja, home also to a major spring, and then on to Qasr al Yehud on the Jordan River where pilgrims come to honor the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and to dip themselves in the river's brown waters.

On the direct route from Jerusalem, which we have often taken to the Dead Sea, there is a place where we would pause to look down at the Jordan Valley from the rock-strewn hills above. It offers an alternative view of the land. Rather than a truncated geography divided by checkpoints, at that high spot the wide natural expanse of the Great Rift Valley stretches long and far. One can literally throw one's gaze to the south where the Dead Sea lies and north to the Sea of Galilee, both stations along the Great Rift that begins in the Taurus mountains in Turkey and extends all the way south to Mozambique in Africa. The natural sprawl of the land, as it was and

hopefully will remain, challenges the restrictive view of a narrow territory, a view imposed on Palestinians during these past seven decades of separation and blockages.

It was only a few days since the Auja Eco Center had re-opened after two years of closure due to the pandemic. The front of the concrete building that houses the center was a tangle of weed. Bassam, who had visited many times, was distressed. “So much is gone,” he said, “here there was gray-water recycling and over there, fish, you know the ones that eat waste.” We walked over to a spot with a rusty round cylinder. “This is the septic tank,” Bassam explained, turning it slightly with a creak. The small pit was empty.

Nader Khatib, the director of the center and a specialist in water resources and environmental engineering, came out of the darkened building to greet us. His hand swept over the tangled land in front of him. “It was a green carpet,” he said, “a green carpet. We’ve just started to clean it up.” A friendly woman emerged to serve us coffee, but there were no other staff. The “we” was absent.

“Why were you closed for so long?” Raja asked. Nader gave him a look – had Raja not heard about the pandemic? But then he added, “And there was Trump,” as if another global disaster had struck our small patch of earth. “He cut off all the AID funding.” Ah, AID, the United States Agency for International Development, which descended on the Palestinian territories in the wake of the Oslo agreements, pouring “development aid” into projects to strengthen the often wavering (and now moribund) peace process, seen sometimes as a blessing, often as a curse.

As we sat in the sun, we learned of the many admirable projects the center had executed in the decade since it was founded in 2010, from gray water and solid waste recycling to encouraging farmers to move away from planting water-intensive crops like citrus and bananas – which require fresh water – to growing dates and even *saber*, the fruit of the cactus plant that is popular in the Middle East both to eat and as a drink. Indeed, the question of water is at the top of his concerns as he moves on to the large and vexed questions of the polluted Jordan River, the shrinking Dead Sea, Israeli

extraction of West Bank water resources, and the urgent necessity of regional cooperation.

“It requires political stability,” he repeats several times, after explaining his visions of a Jordan Valley with flourishing and sustainable water resources. And then he shrugs. And we shrug mentally too, as the grand version of regional cooperation fades. We were all aware of the local circumstances of the Jordan Valley and its Palestinian inhabitants. Israel controls almost 70 percent of the valley, which is designated as Area C, yet Israeli settlements here are largely growing crops for export, such as Medjool dates and citrus, with little concern for water conservation. Israel also has the largest share of riparian rights to the river, with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria having smaller shares. Palestine, or our constrained Palestinian Authority, has none at all at the moment.

Nader explained how even those aspects of the Oslo Agreement that gave concessions to Palestinians have been effectively revoked. The tri-party sharing of water in the section of the river affecting Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority has developed into a two-party agreement with the Palestinians excluded. And Area C, which was eventually to be returned to the Palestinians, is now considered by Israel to be part of its territory. So much for Israel’s respect for agreements reached with Palestinians.

The Eco Center is not alone among Palestinian NGOs, floundering as it does on the twin shoals of lost international funding and seemingly permanent occupation, a state that produces a profound uncertainty in which operations can cease at any moment. Nader’s determination, we hope, will revive at least some of the Eco Center’s programs and indeed he still has a guest house to get up and running and is thinking of opening a restaurant. But there are losses that are hard to recover.

In these desperate times, we sometimes turn a cold eye on the society around us. “They want us to go for entertainment,” Nader says bitterly, citing suggestions from local Palestinians that he build a swimming pool. Like many of us, he mourns the unchecked development in Jericho of villas, apartments and services for well-off Palestinians, usually weekend visitors to the city, and the accompanying destruction of agricultural lands –

and of course the misuse of water. He had returned to the center's educational programs for schools and the community, but was bitter about the lack of environmental awareness in society, ranging from littering to the overexploitation of springs and the ignoring of most of the Jordan Valley north of Jericho and a failure to address its problems. "The Jordan Valley is one-third of the West Bank," he said resentfully, "but the Palestinian Authority and most Palestinians ignore everything north of Jericho." The Jordan Valley, we said to ourselves – perhaps this is our largest lost place.

As he accompanied us to our car – glaring at the boys playing soccer in the playground next door, and who he suspects broke his gate – he shrugged again and said, "Well, it's our country and we are not going to leave it."

We hoped that our next stop, Qasr al Yehud, the monastery complex and baptism site on the Jordan River honoring John the Baptist's original baptism of Jesus, would offer space for peaceful reflection away from the problems of our day. Bassam, however, said that he comes here to think about borders rather than the Bible. As a team of scholars from the London School of Economics and Birzeit University wrote in 2014, "the Jordan River is perhaps the most physically and politically stressed river basin in the world." We entered the road leading to the site with some trepidation.

As we drove up to the river we could see barbed wire fences on the side of the road warning of land mines. Only three years ago, Qasr al Yehud itself was still littered with at least 500 mines, and its eight monasteries had been booby-trapped by the Israeli army in the wake of the 1967 war, apparently to deter "infiltrators" from across the Jordan River with its narrow banks.

After 1967, the site was closed for the next fifty-three years, although a narrow corridor was opened most years for Christians marking Eid El Ghetas, the January feast of the Epiphany, which celebrates the baptism of Jesus and the appearance of the Holy Spirit. Then, after several years of a joint project of land-mine clearance by British and Israeli sappers, in 2020 the Israeli authorities declared it open all year round, to tourists and locals alike.

As we drew up to the entrance, we noted a large Z scrawled on the side gate, by, it seems, a partisan of Russia in the raging war in Ukraine, and it served as a reminder that war and occupation continue to hover over this holy site. Nonetheless, we were excited that we were about to reach the nearest bank of the Jordan possible for us on this side of the border. Since it re-opened, Bassam has made numerous visits to the site and never tires of it. “I like to be reminded how close is Jordan.”

The placard at the entrance, placed there by the “Nature and Parks Protection Authority, Civil Administration in Judea and Samaria,” begins by identifying the site as the place where the Israelites crossed the Jordan River after forty years of wandering in the desert, and where Elijah ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot. Only then does it make reference to Christianity, writing that “in Christianity baptism was adopted as a ceremony of induction into the faith.”

Just beyond the shaded area where the tourists gather we could see a belfry and beyond it a domed steeple with a cross. Walking in the sunshine, we paused at one of several monasteries along the way, including the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint John the Baptist, rebuilt several times since its establishment in the fourth century. Barbed wire and a locked gate confronted us. Perhaps it was still booby-trapped, we thought. For sure it was not a welcoming place.

Greek Orthodox monastery at newly-reopened Qasr
al Yehud baptismal site, Jordan River.

And when we finally stood on our side of the Jordan River and could see Jordanian soldiers standing underneath two hoisted Jordanian flags just a few meters away, the soldiers did not look up. It was only a few years earlier that Jordan began claiming that the site on their side of the river was the actual place where Christ was baptised. We stood silently on the bank of the fast-flowing, muddy river, fed mainly at this point by waste water and

agricultural drainage, looking as far north as possible. There was a bend in the river beyond which we could spy only the greenery that flourished on both banks of the now concealed waters. The narrowness of this holy river, about six meters wide, only reinforced what a ridiculous border this was and yet for more than half a century it has greatly troubled lives and separated us from our own relatives living in Amman.

As we gazed at the brown ripples, we couldn't help but recall the traumatic experiences that each one of us has had in crossing the Allenby bridge on our way in and out of the Occupied Territories. Bassam told how he was once detained for twelve hours until an explosives expert could come to put a hole through a pocket radio that he had with him. His pleas that he could show the expert how it worked went unheeded.

As these thoughts were going through our minds our attention was drawn to an American man, who we saw plunge into the water wearing a light white robe while his group of fellow tourists stood on the platform and clapped. They all accepted the way it was – including dipping in polluted water – and clearly could not spare a thought for our embitterment and distress.

Looking across the depleted Jordan River to Jordan,
Qasr al Yehud.

Lightening the mood, Penny, whose fondness for documents has grown under occupation, remarked, “But I also have a baptism certificate from the Jordan River.” Raja smiled and explained to Bassam that during a visit with an English friend, Liz Taylor, to yet another “alternative” baptism site on the upper Jordan River near Tiberias, he and Liz had purchased a certificate for Penny and proudly presented it to her just as a load of American

Christians pulled up on a bus hosted by the television evangelist Jerry Falwell.

On our way home, we saw an example of the hidden horrors of the Oslo deal that have become a fact of life for the 2,000 residents of Burqa, a village that is only a few kilometers southeast of Ramallah but that under new Israeli restrictions is effectively much further away. Villagers can only leave their community using a narrow road that passes underneath the highway where we had traveled. This tunnel road connects Burqa to the village of Deir Dibwan, still further away from Ramallah. From there, residents needing to get to the nearby city for work or services have to make a detour that takes them to another village, Beitin, and then west to Ramallah, all because use of the connecting road has been forbidden since the establishment of the settlement of Psagot on a hill overlooking the city.

Arriving home, we held on the Nader Khatib's words: "It's our country and we are not going to leave it."

PART TWO

Ottoman Times and Lost Connections

Where shall we go after the last border? Where should birds fly after the last sky?

Mahmoud Darwish, “The Earth Presses Against Us”

4

No Longer a Crossroads: The Lost Connections of Palestine

We first visited Khan al Tujjar (the khan – roadside inn – of the merchants) in the lower Galilee, also known as Khan Ayun al Tujjar (the khan of the springs of merchants), in 1989. We had both joined a geographical trip led by Kamal Abdul Fattah, professor of geography at Birzeit University. There was then no closed border between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. It was a four-day excursion with students from Kamal's classes at the university through the entire land of historic Palestine – its coastal plains, mountains, the Rift Valley and the Naqab desert.

A few miles after leaving Ramallah, Kamal stopped our bus on a hill near the Palestinian village of Beitin. He asked us to look northward and pointed out that we were in the Central Highlands, the spine of hills that runs through the West Bank. To the west was a valley banked by another, lower range of hills. To the north, we could just glimpse the wide plain where all invaders of Palestine – as well as more peaceful travelers, pilgrims and merchants – have made their way. As we traveled northward, Kamal stopped several times as our hills opened up to reveal that plain, Marj ibn Amr (the Jezreel Valley), where the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea) from Egypt turned eastward near Haifa toward the Haurun plains of Syria and the city of Damascus. This ancient route from Egypt to Syria and

beyond dates from the early Bronze Age, 5,000 years ago, and was taken by travelers (as well as armies) well into the nineteenth century. Our small sliver of land, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, was a land bridge between Asia and Africa for millennia.

When our stops happened to be close to Israeli settlements, Kamal would call upon Raja to talk to the field trip participants about the categories of the land we were seeing and the law that applied to each. In those years, the 1980s, we still believed in the law as a weapon against settlements. But, as we later discovered, the planning of these settlements by the Israeli authorities – whether Ofra, Shilo or Eli – was not random but strategic and it did not matter what the category of the land happened to be, whether private or public. These settlements were planned as part of a string of settlements on hills overlooking Highway 60 – which traces another ancient route – and to the east the Jordan Valley. Israel always found ways of explaining away and overriding the legal obstacles and going ahead with the acquisition of the land for the settlements and roads, as it continues to do today.

We spent the first night in a school in Jenin. We had hardly settled in when Israeli soldiers banged at the door. They came in force as though ready for a military confrontation. They asked us what we were doing and when we told them we were on a student field trip, they summarily arrested Professor Kamal and forced him to ride with them in their jeep to the police station. Raja had to revert to being a lawyer. At the station Raja challenged the army to explain which law was being violated by the professor. The army prosecutor did not have an answer. And yet he detained Kamal for further investigation. Perhaps they thought that his detention would force the group to forfeit their plans. Anxious not to allow the army to get away with this, Kamal decided that we should proceed with the trip, under the guidance of his assistant, until he managed to catch up with us. As it was, Kamal was released the next morning and we were able to continue, though it had been a disturbing experience for all of us.

The second day we traveled north to visit the lower and upper Galilee. Near Mount Tabor the bus stopped and we were taken to visit Khan al

Tujjar, which we lamented was unmarked and in disrepair. Still, Kamal, showing us the standing ruins, could evoke the khan's grandeur and importance. Khan al Tujjar was one of some 160 khans, or caravanserai, built in historic Palestine. Some smaller khans were in the coastal cities of Jaffa, Akka and Gaza, others, more extensive, were in the countryside. Khans were like today's hotels and rest houses (one researcher described them as "gas stations") where travelers were able to break their journey, rest and restock. This particular khan also served as a market where thousands congregated from Nablus and as far away as Syria to buy and sell goods. It was spacious and even had a mosque for use by the travelers.

The majority of the caravanserais in Palestine were erected in the Islamic periods, Khan al Tujjar by the Ottomans, although some date back to the Roman-Byzantine era. They were positioned along trade and security routes. Of the numerous khans, spacious caravanserais that dotted the route between Damascus and Cairo serving pilgrims and traders, Khan al Tujjar was among the most impressive. Like the others of its kind, it served as an inn where caravans and convoys of traders and pilgrims rested and replenished supplies for themselves and their animals. Guards were posted inside them and along connecting routes to provide added security for the caravans, which could be subject to Bedouin raids. Khan al Tujjar in the Galilee had a number of springs (Ayun) around it, hence the name Ayun al Tujjar. It was built in the fifteenth century, expanded in 1581, and in use until 1902.

The four-day excursion provided us with valuable insights into Palestine's varied topography and how it related to the country's history. Visiting historical sites where wars had been fought, civilizations arose, and pilgrims and travelers congregated, was invaluable in helping us better understand the relationship between history, geography and the cultures and civilizations that have inhabited Palestine. We visited Kamal in Jenin three years before his death in 2023, and found that he had chosen a home on the western side of a hill so he could look from his patio over Marj ibn Amer (the plain of the son of Amer, which in Hebrew is called the Jezreel Valley), that broad and fertile plain he had first shown us in 1989.

Such a tour could not be repeated today. Checkpoints, closures and a regime of exclusions (sometimes called “permits”) have deprived new generations from gaining an impression of the country as a geographic unit, or, in Kamal’s words, “a detailed and integrated knowledge of the physical and cultural Palestinian landscape.” Without even a memory of how the country used to be, young Palestinians are trapped in small enclaves in the West Bank, separated by checkpoints and walls, or imprisoned in Gaza.

As for Khan al Tujjar, despite all its historic and architectural significance as a gathering place for travelers from all over the region for centuries, and as a site of important Ottoman-era structures, when we tried to return to it on a sunny day in June 2022 we found that the Israeli authorities did not provide access from the road and failed to mark it on any map. Consulting with Israeli guide books yielded no information, so we inquired from a Palestinian guide living in Israel who had a degree in geography, only to discover that the guide had also never heard of it. Helpfully, however, he did some internet research for us and found two possible sites, both near Mount Tabor and on either side of Highway 65, where our bus had stopped so long ago. Of a younger generation, he probably consulted the Wikipedia entry that we had overlooked in our book-reliant quest. Highway 65 traces the east–west route of the ancient Via Maris (the Way of the Sea) across Palestine. We first chose the northern side of the highway, which looked promising. Then a sign offered up the bad news: we were in the wrong place – a forest of the Jewish National Fund.

The second attempt meant leaving the highway for a southerly route through the Circassian village of Kfar Kama, home to one of the oldest communities in the world and one with its own tragic history of loss. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire expelled most of the Circassian population from their homes in the Caucasus region near the Black Sea in an attempt at ethnic cleansing. Hundreds of thousands were massacred. Once an independent nation, the surviving Circassians, mainly Muslim, were largely absorbed by the Ottoman Empire, moving into borderless Ottoman lands across the region – in a similar way, the Empire absorbed

Jewish communities expelled from Spain in 1492. Circassians settled in Amman, now the capital city of Jordan, and achieved prominent positions in Egypt, Libya and other Arab countries. This movement of populations is so different from the restricted movement of refugees today, and the harsh policies of states around the Mediterranean and elsewhere.

On the quiet main road of the village, we hailed a burly young man who was giving a lift in a golf buggy to an older woman wearing a conical headdress and a smile that widened when we asked them the whereabouts of the khan. “There’s a ruin down the dirt road but it’s full of thorns,” she said dismissively. “And anyway, there is not much to see there.” We thanked them and drove until the road ended with a sharp decline. Getting out of the car, we almost immediately plunged into thickets and thorns up to our shoulders. After walking a small distance, we decided that it was futile to keep going, and too dangerous because of the possibility of getting stung by scorpions or treading on snakes. So we retreated and decided to try another route.

We got back in our car and headed once again for Highway 65, parking by a road barrier. We walked along the highway verge – with some trepidation as cars and trucks sped past us – until we spied an opening in the thicket where it was possible to walk through. We could barely see what looked like an ancient pillar and decided to venture toward it. We first had to jump over the metal barrier of the road and then stumble into the tall weeds in which once again we soon found ourselves buried. We eventually came upon a solitary signpost, in Hebrew, and entirely concealed by weeds growing from all sides. With the help of Google Translate, we read a brief and uninformative history of the site – and perhaps the most important fact, that Israel’s Department of Antiquities had last cleaned the site in 1993, almost three decades ago. No wonder the thorns had thrived.

Indeed, the thickets of sage, silver nailroot and silene were shoulder-high. Criss-crossing these were different kinds of thistles, although at that moment we could not appreciate their botanical splendor. The spotted golden thistle with its white veins on its long leaves got caught in our clothing and numerous star thistles closer to the ground scratched our

ankles. But what was dominating was the carline thistle (*Carlina acaulis*), the very spiny perennial plant that grows on reddish brown erect stems to heights of 25 to 40 centimeters. The pom-pom-like formation of its flowers are brownish gray in color. Its name, *Carlina*, comes from Emperor Charlemagne, who reputedly used these plants to cure his army of the plague. Even the names of thistles in our part of the world have connections with other regions, other times. Palestine was a crossroads for travelers throughout the ages.

Standing on this thorny ground we spied an impressive vaulted structure that had weathered the centuries of neglect and remained standing. This, we gathered, must have been one of several lodgings. It was framed by a stone arch with a prominent keystone. The vault was smeared with brown-black algae but the stone walls were still intact. To the left of this, a majestic stone arch framed the sky and its skidding white clouds. Next to it was a wall with two kinds of stone, perhaps from when the khan was repaired in 1581. And further to the left stood what must have been three adjacent rooms. All that was now left were the stone arches and blackened walls. We stood before a column wondering if it was the remains of the mosque that provided the travelers with a place to worship. Visiting the khan in 1649, the intrepid Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi described “three graceful and lofty minarets” that rose in a mosque full of light “as if they were three young coquettish muezzins.” He added that wayfarers “were given a loaf of bread and a tallow candle for each person, and nosebag of barley for each horse – free of charge.”

Whether this generosity continued down the centuries is not recorded, but several visitors described the tradition of a Monday fair that, according to W. M. Thompson, a British visitor in the mid-1850s, brought thousands to the khan, with cotton coming from Nablus, and barley, wheat and corn from nearby Huleh in the upper Galilee and the more distant Syrian plains of the Hauran. Today, we are only two rather puzzled visitors, striving to imagine a lively scene in this place of desolation.

Water was once abundant from the many springs around the khan – hence its name, Ayun (springs). We peered into one flowing out from a

human-made cave covered now by green vegetation nourished by the fresh water. There was a curious long indentation in one of the walls. What purpose it served was difficult to conjecture.

Stone arches stand in the ruins of Khan al Tujjar in
the lower Galilee, once a gathering place for
merchants and travelers on the road from Damascus.

Looking straight ahead we could see Mount Tabor, bathed in blue, with the village of Shibli /Um El Ghanam – a community with Bedouin roots – at its foot, and the Church of the Transfiguration on its gentle round top.

There were periods when the route that travelers took through the Galilee was made dangerous by the attacks on the caravans from the Bedouin tribes nearby. Thus a fortress was built at the khan, with guards to protect the traders.

Bedouin communities have been scattered throughout Palestine for a long time. They moved – and continue to move – their sheep and goats for grazing during the year, going to warmer places when it's time for their flocks to give birth. Israel has long been intolerant of their presence, denying their residence and seeking to take their land, as has been happening for many decades in the Negev (Naqab) desert and, more recently, in Massafer Yatta near Hebron. In 2022, an Israeli High Court decision gave the Israeli army permission to demolish Bedouin dwellings and evict them from the southern Hebron hills, claiming that the land is needed for an army firing range. But the High Court could not have been ignorant of other motives. In 2020, the Israeli Association for Civil Rights submitted a document to the court revealing a 1981 meeting in which Ariel Sharon instructed the IDF to create training zones in South Mount Hebron in order to displace the area's Palestinian residents.

As we looked at the ruins of the khan we were haunted by the words of Khaled Furani, a resident of Haifa who teaches anthropology at Tel Aviv University. We had been standing on the lovely porch of his father's home in Haifa, which abuts the Bahai Gardens. The Haifa Bay was spread out below. Khaled bid us look straight ahead. "There," he said, "you can see Ras Naqoura, the gateway to Lebanon that is now sealed and inaccessible." Then he pointed to the northeast and said, "Syria is right there and on clear days we can see the snow packed on Jabal es Sheikh (Mount Hermon)." Then he added with a heavy heart: "To think that I have relatives in all these countries who I have never been able to visit." He said this with so much grief, as though that calamity had only just happened. His pain was raw and the lament deeply felt.

Memorial at the old Haifa train station commemorating the Hijaz Railway that brought passengers from Istanbul and on to Haifa and beyond.

With Khaled as our guide that day, we strolled by the remnants of the old Haifa train station and saw the pillar commemorating the Hijaz railway

line, which opened in 1905. The train brought grain and other goods from Syria to the Haifa port, traveling along that same Via Maris route used by numberless camel caravans in earlier times. All gone now. This region was once interconnected, enriched by the interaction of various groups and ethnicities who came together in such places as Khan al Tujjar or Haifa, where the railway brought migrants to work from as far away as Istanbul, as well as thousands of Muslim pilgrims, passing through Haifa for the connecting train to Syria and onward on the Hijaz line to Medina. But there was also another important railway line that we wanted to investigate.

After visiting Khan al Tujjar, we were pained by the complete neglect of a site that had brought together people from all over our region. We wanted to explore more lost connections and so we drove north to Ras Naqoura to inspect the place where, prior to 1948, a railway line crossed from Lebanon to Palestine. Taking the cable car up to the white chalk cliffs towering over the open sea, we were joined by both international and local tourists. Bizarrely, the site is also surrounded by barbed wire that goes all the way through the lapping waves. There is something perverted about wire and fences attempting to confine the open sea.

We walked through a series of spectacular cave grottos partially filled by seawater before going through the tunnel along the remains of the railway line. We stood before a photo of the train going through the tunnel. The British-built tracks were still visible and a sign read “Beirut 120 kilometers” with an arrow north and “Jerusalem 270 kilometers” with an arrow south. Beirut was closer to us than Jerusalem, even if wholly inaccessible nowadays.

When Israel occupied south Lebanon in 1982, the border, which was open with what the Israelis termed “the good fence,” allowed passage for those approved from Lebanon to Israel. A black camouflage netting and a locked gate today has replaced the “fence.” A sign warns visitors to stop and soldiers are stationed to assure that no one approaches this strangest of borders.

Visiting this site, we asked ourselves what the tourists who come here were marveling at. Is it the mystery of what lies beyond? Do the tourists

realize that, had there been no border, they could have enjoyed villages and a gorgeous landscape? And who knows what mixture of cultures would have developed?

Recently, a friend from the Palestinian village of Battir near Bethlehem told us how, during the nineteen years of Jordanian rule over the West Bank, the Israeli-run train from Jerusalem to Jaffa passed through the village lands but on the other side of the border. The villagers could only dream of the train trip they were missing and of the sea at the end of the line. When the train passed, the children stood on the side of the barbed wire fence and watched.

The blocked “good fence” between Israel and Lebanon, Ras Naqoura.

Then, after 1967, the Israeli train authority decided to allow the train to make a twice-yearly stop at Battir and let those villagers who wished to do so ride the train to Jaffa, a practice that continued until 1986. And what an exciting event it proved to be. All except the most elderly and infirm took advantage of the opportunity. The preparation for the trip began a week earlier, with parcels of food and pots filled with delicious dishes made ready to take along. Almost the entire village boarded the train, leaving a veritable

ghost town behind – for who would willingly miss such a great opportunity?

No Israelis were allowed to take the train that day. Except for a few soldiers, the train was filled with the villagers from Battir. When it stopped in Jaffa they all got out, filling the streets of the city and the beaches of Tel Aviv with their chatter, walking around as though they owned the place. Their little adventures provided ammunition for discussion and gossip for the rest of the year until the next ride.

Battir is now secluded behind the wall and no trains stop for the villagers. We never had the chance to join them, and in fact only realized how much we relished train travel when we began making the journey from Edinburgh to the Scottish Highlands. We were saddened that the opportunity to travel to surrounding countries by train had ended in 1948. The establishment of Israel in that year severed the lines of communication between the different parts of the Arab lands in the Levant and beyond it to the Hijaz and North Africa.

But then, one Saturday in 2011, we arrived at Nablus train station, a low, thick-walled, stone structure, in time to board the 3:20 p.m. to Jerusalem. Some twenty passengers were waiting at the entrance, mostly young men and women, with a few people old enough to remember the days of train travel during the British Mandate over Palestine. The excitement was palpable: it was our chance to take a ride to Jerusalem, a city most were barred from visiting, bypassing the Israeli checkpoints along the way. As we entered the station, a porter in a dark blue uniform issued us a ticket on the Green Line. The journey would take thirty minutes, with stops planned at Hawwara, Zatara, Uyun al Haramiya, Attarah and Qalandia – all now checkpoints. We made our way to the waiting room. It was barren, except for low tables with brochures entitled “Palestine Connected” showing local train networks and their destinations: Gaza, Jaffa, Haifa, Beersheba.

Soon there was an announcement in Arabic and English: the train would be arriving in three minutes. We could hear it approach, all whistles and honks. The sounds grew louder and louder until they became deafening.

Then, they subsided: the train had arrived. The doors of the waiting room opened, and we were invited to step out onto Platform Number 2. The train was waiting, shrouded in rising smoke. We surged toward its doors as they opened for us.

But there was no getting on. The train was a beautiful momentary mirage that soon dissipated after the image projected onto a screen mounted on the far side of the wall went blank. It was an art installation entitled “Palestine Connected” by the Palestinian artists Iyad Issa and Sahar Qawasmi, set in the pickle factory that now stands where the Nablus central station once was.

After the train disappeared and the screen went blank, the fictitious passengers on the fictitious Platform Number 2 were overtaken by wistful disappointment. An older man, who seemed to be holding back tears, lamented the passing of “those days when we could take the train and travel freely from city to city.”

More than one hundred years ago, the Ottomans built that vast train network throughout the Middle East, first connecting Jaffa and Jerusalem and eventually linking the main cities of the Arab Middle East – Amman, Basra, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem and Medina – to Istanbul. Construction on the Nablus–Jerusalem segment was interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, and the Nablus train station was largely destroyed during the 1948 war.

Today, no train crosses the borders of our tiny occupied territory. The only Green Line we know, the 1948 armistice line dividing historic Palestine, does not connect the capitals of the Middle East; it divides them. Yet for just one moment that Saturday, the imagination of two young Palestinian artists made it possible to project ourselves beyond this dismal present.

5

Lost in Jerusalem: The Nabi Ukkasha Mosque and Tomb

It was our second attempt at locating the Nabi Ukkasha mosque and tomb in western Jerusalem, and this time we were determined to find it. After all, a large Ottoman-era mosque hosting the mausoleum of Nabi Ukkasha, an Islamic holy man who came to Jerusalem with Caliph Omar in the Islamic Arab conquest of the city in the seventh century, could not entirely disappear. The tomb had seemingly rested undisturbed through a succession of Jerusalem's rulers, including the brutal reign of the crusaders in the eleventh century until their defeat by Saladin in 1199. When the Mamluks, a military dynasty of former slave-soldiers, in turn reigned in the city in the thirteenth century, they erected the mausoleum over Ukkasha's tomb, indicating it as a shrine (*maqam*) for a holy man or prophet (*nabi*). The adjacent mosque, also named after Nabi Ukkasha, was built by the Ottomans in the nineteenth century, as their relatively stable rule of Jerusalem drew to a close. Surely such a distinguished site, which has survived for so many centuries and through so many dynasties, could not have vanished?

It was a sunny Saturday in late winter and the city was quiet. We walked up from the familiar streets of eastern Arab Jerusalem to western Jerusalem, crossing the now invisible "Green Line" that divided the city after the 1948

war. The western neighborhoods had been conquered by the new state of Israel and the eastern section had come under Jordanian rule. Then, in the war of 1967, Israel had annexed eastern Jerusalem. Israel had declared Jerusalem an undivided city, but in spirit and in practice it remains divided. Its Palestinian Arab residents in the east are designated “permanent residents,” but are allocated fewer services, fewer permits for housing (and so suffer a high rate of home demolitions for unlicensed building), and their residency in their city is more threatened than permanent.

We were leaving behind the walled Old City on the eastern side, where even the most clueless of visitors would find it hard to miss its major monuments – the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Muslim Haram al Sharif/Al Aqsa compound, and the Jewish Western (Wailing) Wall (also known as Al Buraq by Palestinians). We were searching for a forgotten site in the western neighborhoods of the city.

As we walked up a steep street, we lost the main artery we were seeking and found ourselves in Mea She’arim, a quarter of the Haredi and Hasidic Jews that still has the feel of old Eastern Europe. Before venturing into this labyrinth, we had been unnerved by the sign warning visitors not to enter “because it disturbs the residents here.” We did anyway, and found ourselves amid religious Jews, men dressed in their Saturday synagogue clothes, with long beards and large fur hats, and women wearing wigs and ushering flocks of children. Penny covered her hair with the hood of her coat until she felt stifled by the warm winter sun. We wondered whether the wigs had the same effect. Penny’s hair now uncovered, we walked on with some trepidation.

We seemed to be in the middle of a maze with none but the Haredim community around. There were no cars and it was eerily quiet. We liked the idea of having a day without cars, a day of rest to walk and to play with the children, which was what the people here were doing.

We walked up and down narrow streets looking for the mosque. To no avail. We had the sense of crossing a border into a place where we did not belong. Out of place, we hesitated to ask anyone about a mosque and tomb honoring an Islamic saint. Like many Palestinian sites in western Jerusalem

– homes, businesses or religious sites – the mosque adjacent to the tomb had been abandoned in 1948 when its sole remaining guardian, the sheikh of the mosque, had been forced to flee. A busy ultra-Orthodox neighborhood seemed an alien place in which to find this lonely site. Several years ago, Penny had stumbled on the shuttered mosque during a long walk, but we were beginning to feel that Nabi Ukkasha, with its melancholy history, was now lost forever.

Minaret of the deserted Nabi Ukkasha mosque,
western Jerusalem.

At last, we spied a minaret with a characteristic peaked Ottoman dome rising over a half-full parking lot, dominating the otherwise undistinguished

rectangular mosque. By now it was late afternoon and the sun was shining through the pine trees lighting the limestone stones of the building.

We walked through the parking lot – no one was driving on the Sabbath. A playground, with olive trees to one side, was packed only with young boys, all Haredim, ultra-Orthodox Jews, running joyfully around. One of the boys on the swing swung so fiercely his shoe flew off. Fathers, men in heavy coats and broad-brimmed felt hats, sat in the sun. On a side path, a girl accompanied her mother, pushing a baby buggy.

Penny didn't remember the playground from her earlier visit: perhaps it had been under construction or was empty. Back then she had picked her way over the stony ground in front of the mosque where a guard had said that it was closed.

But now there was no guard. In front of the mosque, and on the edge of the playground, there was a raised stone grave (but not a mausoleum) protected by iron grating. Perhaps, we thought, this is one of the graves of officers from Saladin's army, who, we had read, were buried in the mosque compound. But there is no marker and thus the name of the deceased has been erased from history. But where was Nabi Ukkasha's tomb?

We walked around the mosque, on the eastern edge of the playground, trying to find a way to look inside. The building had high walls, but that is not particularly impressive in a city that boasts the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque. All the windows were completely blocked by metal grates; one charred wall showed evidence of fire. We almost felt grateful that the graceful minaret was still standing. A boy had clambered up one of the walls to the roof and stood glorying in his achievement. He was being looked after by a watchful father sitting on a bench opposite.

But the worn building itself seemed steeped in the desolation of desertion and in its own highly troubled history. In 1929, during the Buraq/Wailing Wall clashes between Palestinians and Jews over the Wailing Wall in the Old City, a Jewish mob – more raging vandals than paramilitary militants – attacked and partially destroyed rooms in the mosque. They desecrated sacred books, stripped a silver nameplate inscribed Ukkasha' that had been sent from Istanbul, and stole a sum of money and a store of

cheese from the home of the imam (the sheikh) of the mosque, as he detailed a week later in an appeal for help to Haj Amin Husseini, the head of the Supreme Muslim Council. He asked the council to help rebuild the tomb and to provide four to five rooms for Muslim visitors. He also appealed for them to build a wall to protect him and his family.

When he wrote his appeal in 1929, the imam and his family were the only Palestinian Arabs left in what was once a mixed Arab-Jewish neighborhood at the turn of the century. Jewish immigrants had been moving in substantial numbers during the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly Orthodox Jews, as the hill on which the mosque compound stands is associated in Jewish religious tradition with Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob and Rachel, biblical figures in the Old Testament. The sheikh must have sought spiritual community in his request for rooms for visitors, as well as material assistance in his physical isolation.

We wandered behind the mosque and investigated another iron grating on a concrete hut. The lone window was shuttered, and we wondered if the squat building might contain the grave. Perhaps whoever is in charge from the municipality or the government had covered the grave in cement to prevent its desecration – after all, religious right-wing Israelis had also attacked the mosque in the winter of 2011. Their graffiti echoed the type we know all too well from current settler attacks on mosques in the West Bank: “Muhammad is dead.” “Muhammad is a pig.” “The only good Arab is a dead Arab.” The attack has another, older echo, as if the events of 1929 had come alive again. History indeed haunts this compound.

But surely Nabi Ukkasha could not also be swept out of history, we say to each other as we leave the playing children for more familiar territory in eastern Jerusalem. We were still determined to keep looking. It is only later, examining photographs, that Penny discovered a domed *turbeh* – the mausoleum! One of the photos of the *turbeh* (Turkish for tomb) is fairly recent. Could we have missed this impressive structure or had the domed building vanished like so much else?

Humbled, we returned several weeks later: our third visit in search of the tomb. Perhaps on those earlier visits we’d been dazed by the twists of

history, known and forgotten, by our many detours, or even by the rising playground noise. We had not turned around and walked through the playground to what should have been obvious to us – a domed structure opposite the mosque, an impressive *turbeh*, the oldest and most important building on the site: the mausoleum of Nabi Ukkasha. Indeed, a lesson in what can be missed when one looks away, whether physical structures or historical events.

We learned that the domed building might also contain the grave of Husam al Din al Qaymari, a commanding officer in Saladin's army, and perhaps someone else from his family. But the idea that Nabi Ukkasha lies there is, as is the case with many of the *maqams* around Palestine, a belief rather than a certainty. In this ancient land, there are multiple sites claiming to be the burial places of saints, prophets and sinners. The pioneering Mandate-era ethnographer and physician Dr. Tawfik Canaan wrote that a number of saints worshipped in *maqams* in Palestine were buried elsewhere. And while he suspected that Nabi Ukkasha did not die in Jerusalem, "it is said" (a very useful phrase) that the ghostly Nabi appeared to a person praying at the spot and ordered him to construct a *maqam.* Claims were made at various times that Moses, Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad were buried in the (crowded!) Nabi Ukkasha compound, leading a British High Commissioner to name a nearby avenue the Street of the Prophets. That street name, still in use, evokes a more companionate version of the three monotheistic religions than does our conflicted present.

Arriving at the tomb, we hesitated before approaching the door. An elderly ultra-Orthodox rabbi and his attendant were peering at two notices in Hebrew. Waiting for them to leave, we walked around the tomb. In the back, a large depression was filled with years of garbage. Two kippa-wearing boys had climbed over the wire fence and were happily crushing cans with their feet, enjoying the pop and crackle of tin. Desecration of a holy site or boys' pleasure? We cannot say.

Mausoleum of the Islamic holy man Nabi Ukkasha
who came to Jerusalem in the seventh century.

When the rabbi and his companion drove off in a cheery golf-cart, we returned to the main door with its large lock. There were Hebrew notices, as well as two faded inscriptions carved in stone on the walls beside the large iron door. The one in Arabic read: “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. This is the shrine of our master Ukkasha, the companion of the Messenger of Allah.”

At home we tried Google Translate, which produced completely incomprehensible texts from the two Hebrew-language paper notices pasted

on the tomb's door. We turned for assistance to Professor David Kretzmer, an Orthodox friend and a professor of law at Hebrew University. He did his best to help us, but, as he explained, it is not easy to understand these texts without knowledge of all the associations, biblical and legendary – and indeed he was right. Both texts concern Benjamin, the youngest son of Rachel and Jacob, whose tribe is associated with Jerusalem. The eldest son of Jacob, by the way, was Reuven or Rubin, whose putative tomb near Jaffa was a site of one of the largest Muslim festivals until 1948, drawing Christian and Jewish revellers together. Prophets feted rather than desecrated – a memory to hold on to.

At home we scrutinize David's valiant efforts to translate and explain the Hebrew flyers. The first offers a plea to the Almighty to enable the devotee to love everyone as Benjamin did and concludes with asking that "I and all my friends and the whole house of Israel will be privileged to see the coming of our righteous Messiah and the building of the Temple, may it be soon in our days, quickly as the blinking of an eye." The second is mainly a collection of sources showing the greatness of Benjamin.

But what to make of these flimsy Hebrew flyers pasted on an Islamic holy site? "Building the Temple" sounds a trigger warning for Palestinians, given campaigns by extremist Jews to destroy Al Aqsa and erect the Temple on that compound; and the "blinking of an eye" is not reassuring. But David is of the opinion that "the text was not written by a nationalist temple fanatic," but reflects the traditional Orthodox view that "it is for God to rebuild the Temple." Still, the site itself is worrying. It is on the "hill" of the mosque and tomb that Benjamin will prepare the ground for the coming of the Messiah. Troubled ground indeed.

As with the boys crushing tin cans on ground that once was holy, it could be that the flyers were simply pasted on a convenient surface, as religious messages for all those observant Jews strolling in the playground. But attacks on the mosque and tomb – whether in 1929 or 2011 – give no comfort. We also visited the Mazor Mausoleum National Park by the side of a bustling highway in the north where a *maqam* stands amid older Roman-era ruins. The Israeli Nature and Parks Authority had erected a sign in

English, Arabic and Hebrew, which explained that “The building became a holy place for Muslims, known as Makam [sic] Nebi Yihiya and remained intact due to its sanctity.” Someone had crossed out the word “sanctity” in all three languages.

In 2004, Adalah, the Legal Centre for Minority Rights in Israel, petitioned the Israeli High Court, on behalf of Islamic religious leaders, to issue an order to compel the relevant Israeli authorities to enact regulations for the protection of Muslim holy sites in Israel, as had already been regulated by law for approximately 135 Jewish holy sites. After five years of litigation the petition was rejected in March 2009, with the court ruling that the designation of Muslim holy sites was a “sensitive issue.” Surely it would have made the search to find – and preserve – the Ukkasha tomb an easier matter.

It is hard not to worry that, without any protection, Nabi Ukkasha may yet witness another siege.

6

Early Aviators Try to Deliver the Mail: The Turkish Pilots

As often as we can, we drive up the eastern side of Lake Tiberias, avoiding the bustling town on the western side and enjoying the steep valleys going up to the occupied Golan Heights. A cryptic sign on the side of the road, indicating a site of significance, had long intrigued us. It reads simply “Turkish Pilots,” with an arrow pointing to an unpaved road. “But we want to get to our walk,” we would say to ourselves, but continuing to wonder.

In that summer of 2021, however, we turned our car off the main road, to make our way at last to the “Turkish Pilots.” We bumped along, passing through a small date grove, and finally arrived.

It is not, as we once thought, a war memorial, although perhaps it was a precursor of war. Two Turkish aviators, Fethi Bey, the pilot, and his navigator Sadek Bey, flying at a maximum of 75 miles per hour in a fragile aircraft made of wood and fabric, crashed on this spot on February 27, 1914, six months before the conflagration of the First World War. They were on their way to Jerusalem, with Cairo their ultimate destination. They were on the unwarlike mission of delivering the first Ottoman airmail.

Prior to their flight, two European aviators had attempted solo flights over the skies of Istanbul and had stirred up an interest in aviation in Ottoman officials as well as the public. In December 1909, as Istanbul

waited impatiently for the then world-famous French aviator Louis Blériot to arrive, a Belgian baron, Pierre de Caters, came to the city before him on the Orient Express, planning, it was said, to fly over the Bosphorus – thus from Europe to Asia. On his second attempt he was in the air only a few minutes before crashing – into a "flock of sheep," according to a Turkish satirist. The baron survived.

Despite this failure, or perhaps because of it, tens of thousands of Istanbul residents turned out on December 12 for the more popular Blériot, who had made the first solo flight over the English Channel. The French pilot got into his plane and then disembarked without leaving the ground, worried about the weather conditions. But the pressure of his companions and the public convinced him to attempt a takeoff. The plane disappeared and anxiety swept the crowd. Blériot was found alive some hours later, his plane destroyed; he had crashed into a house. He never mounted an exhibition flight again.

Interestingly, these two failures seemed to have spurred the Ottomans to train their own aviators and initiate an Ottoman air force. Thus Fethi Bey and Sadek Bey, the two "Turkish pilots" who met their fate in Palestine, were in 1911 sent by the Ottoman navy to France in order to train. After their return to Istanbul and the delivery of two aircraft, also from France, it was time for the beleaguered Ottoman Empire to show its colors, as, according to the memorial's inscription, "one of the great powers achieving success in long-distance flights."

Fethi Bey, Sadek Bey and a third pilot in a separate aircraft successfully flew from Istanbul to Damascus, but the second plane suffered mechanical failure and was grounded there. So Fethi Bey and Sadek Bey took off on a flight from Damascus to Jerusalem, where a crowd waited to greet them. But, as the memorial inscription notes, the two aviators were "not aware of the winter easterly winds" that swept over the Golan Heights and the stormy conditions took their lives.

Ottoman officials bore the bodies away by train to Damascus, where they were buried in state in the Great Mosque. A memorial was also erected on the site of the crash, its base from a Byzantine building in the nearby

Palestinian Arab village of Samra and with an obelisk of red limestone streaked with white. Samra no longer stands – its inhabitants were exiled in 1948 – and the monument lay forgotten for many decades until its unlikely resurrection in 1995 by Yerach Paran, a military historian and resident of Kibbutz Ha'on, built on the ruins of Samra. His assiduous care of the site brought a Turkish official there, resulting in the erection of the present memorial, on the crash site, that we viewed on that summer morning in 2021. As we stood before the monument, we asked ourselves how was it possible that Paran, who died in 2020, should have worked for years to memorialize these two Turkish pilots, however heroic their endeavor and however sad their demise, while ignoring the tragic fate of the 300 residents of Samra, whose destroyed homes lay beneath his feet in his kibbutz home. The people of Samra were expelled from their homes on April 21, 1948, their village destroyed and their lands cultivated by the new residents. We do not know Paran's thinking but surmise that the recognition of Ottoman history poses no threat to Israel's narrative while the Nakba does.

Plinth memorializing two Turkish pilots who crashed
on the eastern shore of Lake Tiberias in 1911.

The pilot of the second plane had no memorial at the site where he perished. Following repairs in Damascus, Nuri Bey took off and successfully landed in Jaffa, where a crowd feted him. But on his takeoff from the beach, he crashed into the sea and his body was never recovered.

His name is mentioned alongside Fethi Bey and Sadek Bey in an Aviation Martyrs' Memorial in Istanbul (Fethi had a town named after him in 1934), but that is all. An official history of Turkish aviation does not mention him but notes that a "Captain Salim" completed Fethi Bey's flight to Cairo on May 6, 1914. No other details were given.

As the twentieth century began, four flimsy planes took off: two shorter flights in 1909 by European pilots over Istanbul, and two more ambitious long-distance flights in 1914 by Ottoman pilots. All four planes crashed, with the Ottoman pilots losing their lives in the process.

Looking back from our own traumatic time more than a century later, we are tempted to view these attempts to lay claim to modernity (and their disastrous results) as harbingers of the larger catastrophes that would follow: world wars; predatory capitalism; the ravaging of the planet. And for us in this region, the Ottoman defeat in the First World War drew competing European colonial powers, who created new lines on maps and thus through lives and societies.

But in the quiet of the memorial, with a gentle breeze from Lake Tiberias cooling us in the summer heat, we also paused to consider the courage of the pilot and navigator as they exercised their newly found skills, and the poignancy of their ordinary mission: delivering the mail. We looked up at the occupied Golan Heights, reminded of the power of wind and storm to defeat every human purpose.

PART THREE

Traces of the Nakba

Our traces have all been erased
our impressions swept away—
and all the remains
have been effaced …
there isn’t a single sign
left to guide us
or show us a thing.

Taha Muhammad Ali, “Ambergis”

7

Not a Single Sign? Searching for the Nakba

On a clear bright day in December we went in search of a memorial of the Nakba in the Galilee but found none. We had read that the sole existing monument to the Palestinian Nakba (meaning “catastrophe”) among Palestinian communities inside Israel was in Kfar Kanna (Kfar Cana), a bustling town near Nazareth where Christians believe that Jesus once graciously turned water into wine for a festive wedding celebration. A commemoration of the Nakba is of course the opposite of a celebration: a remembrance of absence – not only of the erasure of over 400 Palestinian villages and the exile of three-quarters of a million Palestinians in the 1948–49 war but the disappearance of Palestine itself. Surely the event is worthy of a memorial.

In its wake, Palestinians who remained inside the borders of the new Israeli state struggled to survive in a climate ruled by fear and trauma. As we discovered, more than seventy years later, the Nakba, that most searing event in the life of the Palestinian nation, is not commemorated in stone in a lasting memorial but through Palestinians who remained in Israel engaging in Marches of Return, annual marches, launched in the 1980s, whereby descendants walk to the sites of destroyed villages from which their forebears were exiled.

The Kfar Kanna memorial that we set of to find that day was the lonely result of an initiative of Palestinian political leaders inside Israel on the Nakba's fiftieth anniversary in 1998. Prominent figures in the Galilee formed a committee and urged Arab municipalities to establish monuments to the lost lives, lost land, and the common tragedy of the Nakba. A Palestinian poet, Taha Muhammad Ali, was appointed to lead the campaign.

Taha, a poet whom we had never met but greatly admired, was himself from a village destroyed in the Nakba. Saffuriyya, near Kfar Kanna and Nazareth, was occupied by Israeli ground troops in July 1948 and subjected to a series of air strikes. The village was levelled to the ground, its 5,000 inhabitants forced into exile, many over the border to Lebanon and others to neighboring villages. Taha was not given to political testimony but in a 2003 local publication, he wrote:

> They came before dawn … they killed and injured and arrested and scattered the villagers in all directions. Then they set out to demolish the village, in a very systematic way … and they wiped out all traces of our presence, and anything that would be a reminder of it. My parents and I ended up as refugees in Lebanon.

After several years in Lebanon and an arduous journey back to their homeland, Taha and his family managed to return and to live in Nazareth, where Taha ran a souvenir shop for most of his life.

Taha, whose formal schooling was limited, wrote three collections of poetry. His poems at first seem simple, but they draw on rich and complex literary legacies, from pre-Islamic poetry to Shakespeare, and, indeed, to Homer, evoking his village as a "lost Troy." Unlike a younger generation of Palestinian poets, he is rarely explicitly political and is often wryly humorous. In his poem "Abd El-Hadi Fights a Superpower," he writes of an illiterate man whose case is hopeless: "His Godgiven rights are a grain of sand/tossed in the sea." But he assures his readers that:

were he to encounter

the entire crew
of the aircraft carrier *Enterprise*,
he'd serve them eggs
sunny-side up
and labneh
fresh from the bag.

Perhaps the closest to a political evocation comes in his poem "Exodus":

The street is empty
as a monk's memory,
and faces explode in the flames
like acorns—
and the dead crowd the horizon
and doorways.
No vein can bleed
more than it already has,
no scream will rise
higher than it's already risen.
We will not leave!

These haunting images illuminate why Taha agreed to lead the 1998 campaign to remember the Nakba in stone. This initiative, however, foundered on other implacable rocks, as the organizers, concerned about their own precarious situations under the Israeli government and its institutions, feared that government officials would cut the funding of local councils. Surviving in the present rather than remembering the past remained a priority. We could understand their fear from contemporary events: the Israeli government's recent banning of gatherings or marches to commemorate the Nakba; the 2018 passing of the Jewish Nation-State law by the Israeli Knesset, affirming Israel as an exclusive Jewish state and thus denying equality to Palestinian citizens; a 2011 budget amendment to

withdraw funds from municipalties that commemorate the Nakba; and indeed, the suppression of free speech on Israeli university campuses, when, for example, an Arab female student at Ben Gurion University attempted to read a poem by Mahmoud Darwish at a gathering on the anniversary of the Nakba. The poet's words "We will not forget the martyrs who fulfilled the unity of the country, the people and history" were considered an incitement to terrorism.

It was this ongoing climate of denial that propelled us out of Ramallah once again to the Galilee in search of Palestinian memories encoded in stone. We were told that the Nakba memorial was behind the new mosque in Kfar Kanna. It was over a decade since Raja had visited the town to interview a man in his nineties, hoping to hear his memories of the First World War in Ottoman times, research for Raja's book, *A Rift in Time: Travels with My Ottoman Uncle.* But the old man had no memories of that war. He told Raja: "During the First World War I hid in a cave, I didn't want to be taken to the Ottoman army." Remembering his words, we acknowledged the slipperiness of personal recollection and thought that Nakba memories might also be hidden in a dark cave.

As we drove on through Kfar Kanna, the beauty of its hilltops was obscured, not only by high-rise housing but by advertising boards displaying international brands ranging from sportswear to pizza. We peered hopefully at every traffic circle, searching for a memorial, and strained to look over the crowded houses, hoping to see the "new mosque" with the memorial nearby. Our search having failed, we stopped at several local shops, and asked about the "martyrs memorial," as we had heard it called, since the names of Kfar Kanna residents lost in more recent uprisings and raids had been added to this elusive "Nakba" monument. A grocer, disappointed we were not customers, simply shrugged, but his neighbor told us to continue along the busy street until the end.

And finally, there it was, at the southern entrance to the town, a monument that was unveiled in September 2000, a few days before the eruption of the second intifada. It was built as a round plaza with a wall on its eastern side and a stone column in its center. We parked and crossed the

street. “Oh no,” Penny whispered, as the site came more clearly into view. A banner for a dental clinic fluttered on an iron railing, and stacks of plastic chairs and discarded cardboard rose above a rectangular pillar topped with an urn, over which drooped a few dried sprigs of plants. The pillar itself had a simple dignity. A raised calligraphic inscription on black iron at its front celebrated Kfar Kanna as “the wounded bride of Galilee,” evoking the biblical wedding at Canna. On its sides a Quranic verse, also in black calligraphy, was somewhat marred by scrawled graffiti below: it was hard to know what scrawling “Allah u Akbar” (God is great) added to the elegant Quranic text that read: “And reckon not those who are killed for Allah’s sake as dead, they are alive.”

The wall behind featured the names of martyrs, all from Kfar Kanna and most, we assumed, young men, listed in time periods: from the 1930s to the 1940s, the 1950s to the 1970s, and on into the 2000s. The word “Nakba” did not appear once, but as we contemplated the roll call of the dead from decade to decade, we thought that perhaps this was because the Nakba was ongoing. As we stood before the wall, we felt the silence, in spite of the roaring traffic. We even partially forgave the plastic chairs, used for public gatherings at the site.

We refused to abandon our search, thinking that there must be more to Nakba commemorations and the search for memories of this defining (and continuing) event. We decided to head for the Tzipori national park, a few miles north. The site of Tzipori, now both a kibbutz and a park, was once the village of Saffuriyya, where Taha Muhammad Ali had been born in 1931 and where he grew to adolescence before his family was driven out in 1948. Two decades ago, we had walked through the pine forest that had been planted by the Jewish National Fund over his destroyed village. A scattering of tumbledown stone walls had been the only evidence of Saffuriyya so we walked up to the top of the hill, hoping for more.

Deciphering a sole memorial to the Nakba without
the word “Nakba,” Kfar Kanna, Galilee.

At the peak of the hill we discovered the fortress – originally a Crusader castle, then rebuilt by the eighteenth-century ruler of the Galilee, Dahar al Omar. On the top floor of this imposing building, Taha Muhammad Ali

went to school, all too briefly. We paused on the roof of the fortress, looking north toward Lebanon.

On this more recent visit, we followed the signs in the opposite direction, to the Tzipori national park, driving along a winding road. The fields stretching south had stands of cactus plants, used by Palestinians as separation walls for villages and agricultural fields – another physical sign that Saffuriyya had once existed.

At the national park, a timeline of habitation at the site spanning 3,000 years noted Saffuriyya three times: once in the medieval Mameluk period when "a small Arab village on the site was established"; once in the Ottoman period when the "village grows"; and once in the British Mandate period when, as if the third time must portend disaster, "the village is conquered by Israel in the War of Independence." We found it odd that the timeline – and the pocket history in the pamphlet provided at the entrance – gave some of the shifting names of this site inhabited by Canaanites, Jews, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders and Muslims, but not the name commonly used by international archaeology – Sepphoris. So one missing name and one, Saffuriyya, given little weight. "Too many names," we thought, and then Penny recalled a favorite poem of Pablo Neruda of that title:

They have spoken to me of Venezuelas,
Of Chiles and of Paraguays;
I have no idea what they are saying
I know only the skin of the earth
and I know it is without a name.

The skin of the earth – perhaps that is where we would find the lost rural world of Saffuriyya. But as our current climate catastrophe attests, we humans tend to neglect the skin of the earth in our drive for dominance. And archaeology is often a site of contest as well as exploration. It was not surprising that the emphasis in the park information was on the Jewish period, and on the Jewish sages that lived on this ancient hilltop. It was interesting, however, that the ruins of a Jewish synagogue from the

Byzantine period had inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic, and mosaics, albeit of biblical themes, that attest to shared artistic traditions – and perhaps common cultures – with Christian Byzantines and Roman pagans. Perhaps we know the earth when we acknowledge our common debt to it.

Indeed, as we wandered through the excavations, what was striking – here in this ancient place on a Galilee hilltop, in this land where all three monotheistic religions were followed – were the luminous mosaics of pagan gods and heroes. A centaur prances, an Amazon warrior princess stands tall, Dionysus and Heracles have a drinking match. We were cheered by their beauty and elan.

An earthquake in 363 CE buried some of the dwellings that housed these beautiful mosaics, but the city of Sepphoris itself was quickly rebuilt. Nearly two millennia later, Saffuriyya was buried deliberately and its inhabitants forbidden to return or rebuild their homes and lives. Coming down from the hill, we noticed what we had failed to see on our ascent: a small overgrown patch of ground with a simple sign: “A Moslem Cemetery.” So perhaps, some of the dead remain.

If not a stone memorial, or the traces of a village, where could we find the Nakba; in what medium and in what memories? In our own town of Ramallah, several months earlier, we had joined the annual procession on May 15, Nakba Day. Many people gathered for the march, some, perhaps, because they had been released from their jobs in the Palestinian Authority. It was, after all, an official commemoration. But it was also likely that the crowd included many of the descendants of refugees from coastal Palestine who had fled to Ramallah in 1948, such as Raja’s family from Jaffa and a flood of desperate refugees from Lydda (now Lod), who walked all the way, some fifty kilometers in the burning summer heat.

Ramallah streets were bedecked with signs proclaiming “We Will Return,” after listing the names of the erased Palestinian villages. The uniform signs had the stamp of official distribution from the Palestinian Authority. A siren blew for seventy-four seconds, a second for each year since the Nakba took place. The congestion was such that the traffic was at a standstill. All the streets were blocked. It was as though Ramallah was a

sea of cars. Stalls selling all sorts of fruits and soft drinks were at every intersection. All the fruits were Israeli produce. Israel had succeeded in placing us in a ghetto of confined space, turning us into consumers of the fruits that we used to cultivate before our land was taken and our laborers became workers in Israel and the illegal settlements. We noticed one man prowling the sidewalks, busy collecting used plastic water bottles and cramming them in boxes in order to get refunds. He was the most productive among us, in a gathering that seemed to us disheartening. To properly reflect on the Nakba – to bring it into our lives and our times – we would have to search elsewhere.

Several years earlier, in 2018, the same year the Israeli government passed the nation-state law (affirming that "the realization of the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is exclusive to the Jewish People"), we had set off from Ramallah to explore four art exhibits in Israel that had traces of the Nakba. Perhaps the most telling was "Whirlwind," in which Israeli artist Gaston Zvi Ickowicz exhibited his photos, grainy, blurred and eerie, of the ruins of three Palestinian villages – Simsim, Najd and al-Mansura – which, surprisingly, became visible after incendiary kites and balloons, launched by Gazans over the "border" between Gaza and southern Israel during that year's massive Great Marches of Return, burned away the vegetation that had covered them. The activism of Gazans – a majority of whom are refugees – combined with an artist's vision to reveal lost places and hidden memories.

The question we asked then remains unanswered: are artists, poets and writers offering some hope for countering today's politics of exclusion, which, it seems, can forbid even memory? Is there, in other words, a return of the repressed through the work of artists?

In a welcome coincidence, we had another opportunity to explore banned memories through art when we returned to the Galilee a month later to view an exhibition by artists from the Abu Shaqra family in the museum of Ein Harod, an Israeli kibbutz. The headline in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* had intrigued us: "Israeli Museums Are Afraid to Talk About the Nakba: The Abu Shakra Artist Family Makes History."

The artists of the Abu Shaqra family have lived in Um al Fahm, a crowded town just below the Galilee, since their expulsion from the village of Lajjun during the Nakba. Lajjun was destroyed and its land is now the site of Kibbutz Megiddo, not so far from Kibbutz Ein Harod where the exhibition was hosted. As we drove up from the Jordan Valley toward Ein Harod, we passed through the invisible landscapes of the Nakba. And while the artists of the Abu Shaqra family – Asim, Walid, Farid, Said and Karim – are in no way obscure, this major collective retrospective offered us the opportunity not only to see the works of major Palestinian artists, but also to try – once again! – to understand how the Nakba weaves in and out of artists' imaginations.

In the museum, crowded with Saturday visitors, we are drawn first to the images most familiar to us from reproductions: Asim Abu Shakra's vivid paintings of cactus plants confined in pots. The cactus (*saber* in Arabic) is ubiquitous around Palestinian villages, serving both as a protective fence and a cherished food when the prickly pears emerge in springtime. This resilient plant served us as a marker, showing where Saffuriyya had once stood. Studying in Tel Aviv in the 1980s, away from Um al Fahm and its beloved landscape, Asim happened to see a cactus in a pot in a neighbor's window and was transfixed. He began painting potted cactus plants over and over with multiple overtones: nature confined but also nature reclaimed from an Israeli narrative where the nickname for the "new Israeli" is a sabra, a cactus. There were also more personal meanings. Asim, who, tragically, died in 1990 at the age of twenty-eight, once said that he repeatedly painted the cactus because of "its amazing ability to flower out of death."

Palestinian artist Asim Abu Shaqra's painting of a confined cactus (*sabra*) plant. Ein Harod museum, Galilee.

We stand before Asim's 1989 painting *Cactus on a Window Sill*, which shows the plant's unnatural confinement as well as the painted cactus's

vitality, spilling over the pot and bending to the world outside. In another, the plant is almost ghostly, leaning as if in search of light. The iconic cactus in his work has a strange double: Asim repeatedly painted planes, possibly war planes, including an early image of himself dragging a plane. Whether he is responding to tales told in his childhood of planes destroying his village of Lajjan or more recent Israeli wars (the 1982 war in Lebanon comes to mind), we do not know, but the images are powerful and ominous.

We linger even longer in the room featuring the small drypoint etchings in black and white by Asim's older cousin, Walid, which struck us as a still and peaceful contrast to Asim's vibrant work until we began to see deeper meanings. Of all the Abu Shaqra artists, Walid embraced the Sufi heritage of his family most fully. In his 2001 *View from Mintaret al Batten* an ancient olive tree stands amid thistles, its fruit-bearing branches gone, with two denuded limbs raised to the sky. Walid often painted the view from the roof of the *mintar* (*qasr*), a stone structure resembling a cairn used for agricultural storage, high on the al Batten hill above Um el Fahm. His repeated images of olive trees, some uprooted and some standing but always solitary, give off a strong sense of place and a quiet desolation. Such emotions are also evident in his series "Landscapes: Miniatures" from 2011, which, as fellow artist Kamal Boullata has noted, "do not exceed the size of an identity card" and thus "the land's traces can be carried in a pocket."

The Abu Shaqra works offered us beauty in response to the Nakba and its consequences. As Taha Muhammad Ali wrote on his birthday in 1991:

> And so it has taken me
> all of sixty years
> to understand
> that water is the finest drink,
> and bread the most delicious food,
> and that art is worthless
> unless it plants
> a measure of splendor in people's hearts.

After a visit to the ailing Taha in Nazareth, the poet Meena Alexander wrote:

I think of Suffuriyya, your village destroyed,
…
It lives in our head.
You look to the side, fall quiet.
A tear rolls from your eye.
I cannot bear it now and say – Taha Muhammad Ali, sir,
Your poems are a garden. The sky is beyond us.
The garden will outlast us.

8

Document and Destroy: The Erasures of Manshiya, Jaffa

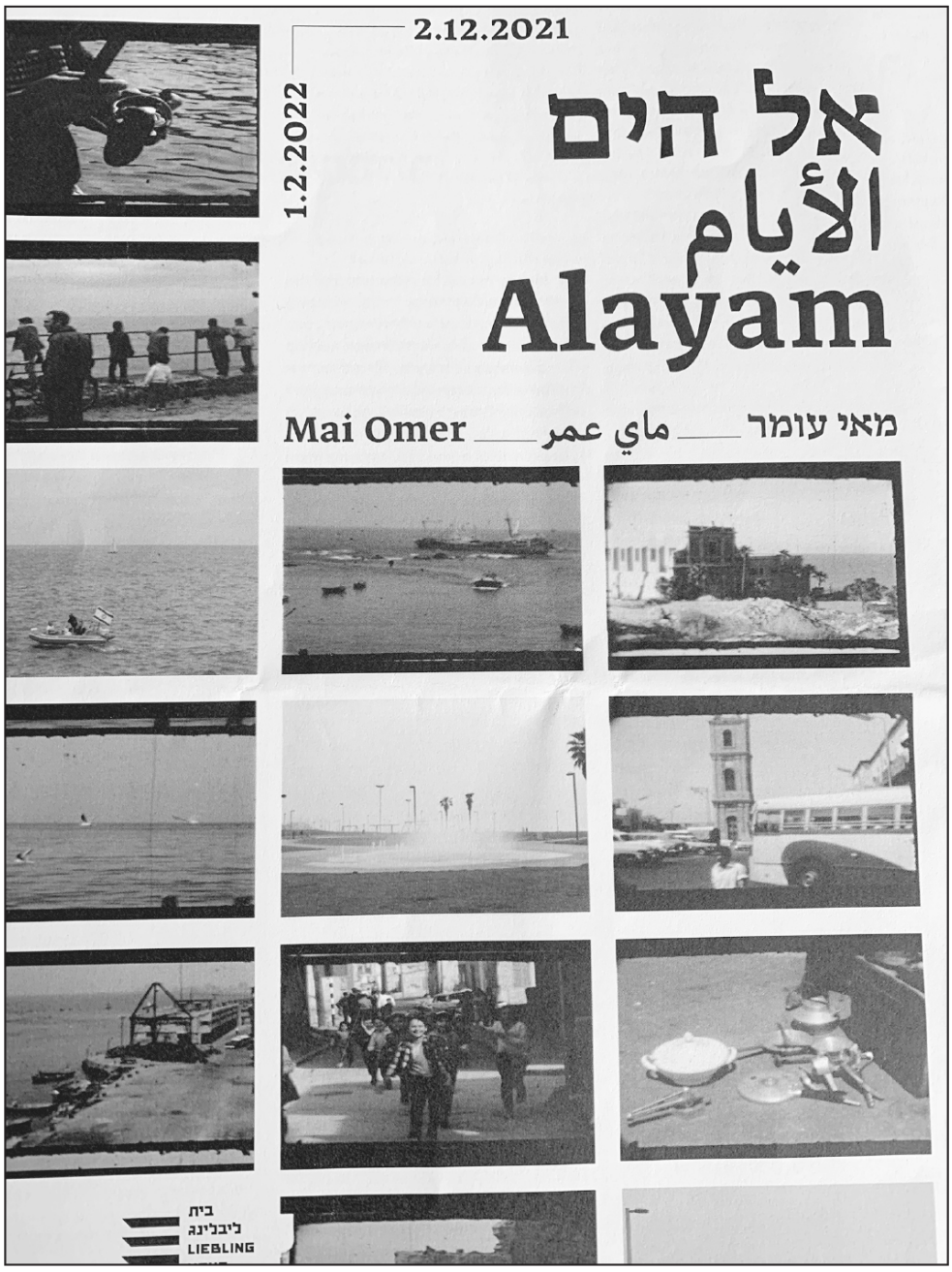
A small boy with a big umbrella battles the rain coming in from the windswept, wintry Mediterranean Sea. But he cannot fight what is coming just a few months later, in the spring of 1963: the deliberate destruction of his community, Manshiya, to build a seaside park on the littoral between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, as well as a complex of modern high-rise buildings on the city side.

In a resurrected black and white film from that year, the camera sweeps over the boy's neighborhood of alleys, stone houses and small shops, recording what is about to vanish. The filmmaker, Hillel Omer (also known as Ayin Omer), was also the destroyer, the architect of the coming Charles Clore Park that was built upon the ruins of Manshiya, the rubble from which was thrown into the Mediterranean Sea. It is this paradox of documentation and destruction that his granddaughter, Mai Omer, explored in a 2021–22 exhibit "Alayam," ("The Days" in Arabic, "To the Sea" in Hebrew) at the Liebling Haus gallery in Tel Aviv, which we visited as the troubled year of 2021 drew to a close.

We had walked in Charles Clore Park (named for the UK billionaire who funded much of its construction) some months before, dodging joggers, cyclists and dog walkers on the paths that wound through

manicured green lawns (much of it Astroturf), with a scattering of scenic cypress trees and less attractive palm stands. We knew that Manshiya was below our feet, but there were no traces of this community that had had two lives before it disappeared forever.

The first life of Manshiya was largely Palestinian Arab. Manshiya was founded at the end of the 1870s as a new northern neighborhood outside the city walls of Jaffa, the coastal city Palestinians called “the bride of the sea.” It grew into one of the city’s most populous and bustling neighborhoods. A profile of Manshiya by the Israeli organization Zochrot (Remembrance) cites a 1944 police report, which stated that 12,000 Palestinians lived there along with 1,000 Jews. Most residents were engaged in commerce; it is striking that Manshiya had six hotels and twenty coffee shops, as well as small factories, shops and other enterprises. It also had a reputation for a lively and perhaps illicit nightlife.



Poster for Mai Omer’s “Alayam” (“The Days” in Arabic, “To the Sea” in Hebrew) exhibition in Tel Aviv. Her father filmed the Manshiya neighborhood in Jaffa before he oversaw its second destruction in 1963.

But Manshiya also became a frontier in the battle for Jaffa during the 1948 war. In April 1948, the militias of the Zionist Irgun and Stern Gang brutally conquered the community, razing much of it to the ground and causing its Arab inhabitants to flee, some to Jordan, some to Gaza, with a smaller number remaining in Jaffa under the new Israeli state, declared on May 15, 1948. Indeed, all of Jaffa – allotted as an enclave to Palestinian Arabs under the United Nations 1947 partition plan – was occupied territory.

As Israeli anthropologist Daniel Monterescu remarked to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*: "For Palestinians, it's extremely painful to go through Manshiya because it was the ultimate site of urban erasure – erasure of the community, but also erasure of space."

Monterescu grew up in Manshiya during its second life, after 1948, when poor Jewish families moved into its ruins and inhabited those houses that were still standing. Their tenure was insecure: modern Tel Aviv and its ambitious planners saw Manshiya as a backward, a dirty blot on the White City (so called after its Bauhaus modernist buildings) and proposed a number of plans for its eradication, culminating in the plan to turn a living neighborhood into a seaside park. To be sure, little survived of the vibrant life of cafés and hotels of the first Manshiya in this poor enclave. There is a ghostly cast to Hillel Omer's 1963 film, as if the buildings and inhabitants were already vanishing. Omer's granddaughter Mai, in an interview with the exhibition's curator Eran Eizenhamer, says her grandfather "documents and destroys at one and the same time." In her investigation, she counterposes the 1963 film with her own contemporary photos, propelled, she says, by her fascination with "silenced narratives": "Manshiya is a classic example of hidden history."

We put aside, for a moment, this second hidden history: like all viewers, we attend to more than one past. We enter one of the exhibit's two darkened rooms. Photographs are projected onto two large screens in adjoining rooms, separated by a clear panel of glass. At first, we are confused: the black and white images by Hillel Omer in the first room are not identified; there is no voice-over. We can hear our own breath. Penny's voice, as she

points to the screen in the other room and the photos in color, sounds like an echo: “Look, these are contemporary.” But some images from the past intersect with these, and the present-day photos themselves are ghost-like, their colors muted. There are very few people in the images: a lone man in a rubber dinghy in an otherwise empty sea, a long view of an empty park in what looks like a sandstorm. Nothing seems stable. In both rooms, we are often facing lonely seascapes, the pounding waves coming toward us.

We wonder why Hillel Omer chose to film the community that his plans would soon destroy on a wintry day when the sea was blue-black. He was a poet as well as an architect so his decision must have been deliberate. In his film, he often focuses on windows and arches looking toward the sea. They beckon us – but to where? Only once is there a woman in a window looking back. And then we notice the bullet holes on some of the stone walls. Yes, there are playful children, some coming toward the photographer as children often do. But we see very few adults, and some of the small shops are shuttered. One sign indicates a “Nouveauté,” small items for poor people. The bustle of pre-1948 Manshiya is long gone.

The camera circles around the iconic Hassan Bek mosque, preserved from Manshiya through great effort by the Palestinian communities around it. Attention is also given to a church just beyond, Saint Peter’s Church, which was also built in the late Ottoman era. Hillel Omer’s camera seems to find comfort in its courtyard, arches and baroque features.

Mai Omer’s film, as if in counterpoint, also roams over the church, but goes on to a nearby luxury housing project, with its swimming pool overlooking the sea. This is the Andromeda Hill housing project, a gated community with a private police force, whose wealthy residents, overwhelmingly Jewish, have little or no interaction with their poor Arab neighbors in Jaffa’s nearby Ajami quarter to the south.

Oddly, Omer’s camera does not capture the Etzel Museum at the southern tip of Charles Clore Park, which was opened to the public in 1983. The museum, built with three walls from the last remaining structure in Manshiya’s ruins, celebrates the fall of Manshiya to the Irgun and the subsequent conquest of all of Jaffa, even though Jaffa was allotted to the

Palestinians in the partition plan. A stone plaque cemented into the exterior wall of the museum reads in capitals: ETZEL HOUSE / IN MEMORY OF LIBERATORS OF JAFFA / THE MUSEUM OF JAFFA'S LIBERATION.

We hesitate at the door of the museum, feeling like unwelcome visitors to a hostile territory. The foyer has a mountain of large backpacks. As we cautiously step our way through, we encounter a crowd of young Israeli army recruits so we consider going back. But we decide to proceed. Perhaps we should hear how this history, which so changed Palestinian lives – including Raja's family from Jaffa – is being presented to this new generation of Israeli fighters.

We follow quietly, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible while the new soldiers are shepherded around and introduced to the Israeli narrative of the events of 1948. And it is now the *official* narrative; the museum is administered by none other than the Israeli Ministry of Defense. These young people perhaps have no idea that the Irgun and Stern Gang (also known as LEHI) were once considered terrorist organizations, not only by Palestinians but by the British and, indeed, internationally, and their activities were often unsanctioned by the official Zionist forces, the Haganah.

Ironically, we scrutinize the photos, maps and podcasts more attentively than many of the young Israelis, a number of whom are hunched over their mobile phones. Their guide has to keep waving them into a circle before the exhibits. When they move away from one of the video installations, we step up to listen to Menachem Begin, the head of the Irgun and subsequently Israel's prime minister, from 1977 to 1983, as he rallies his militia members on April 24, 1948, just before the first assault on Manshiya (English subtitles were provided). His words are both chilling and contradictory:

> We are going to conquer Jaffa. This will be one of the most decisive battles in the war for Israel's independence. Know who is before you, remember who you left behind. You face a ruthless enemy who intends to wipe us out … Show no mercy in battle just as the enemy

has no pity upon our people … Be compassionate with women and children.

Photo of the first destruction of Manshiya in 1948 by Menachem Begin's militas and the Stern Gang, with the Hassan Bek mosque in the background. Etzel Museum, Tel Aviv.

Penny could see Raja's cynical smile as he heard the word "compassionate." The memories of the suffering his parents had endured in their final days in Jaffa in 1948 were vivid. At the beginning of that fateful year, the Stern Gang had exploded a truck covered with a load of oranges at the entrance to the Grand Saraya, the old Ottoman headquarters, destroying the building and killing some twenty people. Yet Raja's parents, Aziz and Widad, with an infant daughter Siham, decided to remain until April when the Irgun, with their companion militia LEHI, began their assault on Manshiya. On April 26, the Irgun mortars began shelling both Manshiya and northern Jaffa, not far from where Aziz and Widad lived.

His mother had told him how the shelling convinced them to wait for the end of hostilities in their summer house in Ramallah. Raja had lately discovered that his father returned briefly the following month, as he was listed as attending a May 5 meeting of Jaffa "notables" with the British district governor, a meeting at which the governor simply urged them to declare Jaffa an "open, undefended city" in order to prevent further destruction. The British officer duly left for his home in England on May 13 and Jaffa surrendered on May 16. Aziz and Widad were never able to return home and their house, all their belongings and their properties were confiscated. So much for the compassion of Begin's merciless force that erased a whole community and sent its people into exile.

There was a display panel celebrating the Irgun's victory at Deir Yassin (again aided by the LEHI). The well-documented massacre of 254 Palestinians in the Jerusalem-area village of Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948 is an event engraved in Palestinian memory. The ethnic cleansing of Manshiya several weeks later was accompanied by psychological propaganda in Arabic that promised the residents a fate similar to that of the residents of Deir Yassin. Could this have contributed to the decision of Raja's parents to leave?

Looking more closely at the exhibit, we read the words of the label below a map of Deir Yassin showing the Irgun troop movements, and it's almost as though we are deciphering a foreign language: "In the Deir Yassin battle, five of our fighters fell while the number of Arab casualties is under

dispute.” The contradictions between their world and ours was too much to bear. We fled to the funereal park, which offered no respite, and stood for a while by the open sea.

Later, at home, our scattered knowledge of Manshiya was assisted by sober histories. The Irgun attack on Manshiya was commanded by Amachai Paglin, known as Gidi, the mastermind also of the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in July 1946, which was directed at the British authorities and killed ninety-one people. (The Irgun museum’s official name is Beit Gidi.) Gidi’s message to the militia assaulting Manshiya was revealing:

> To prevent constant military traffic in the city, to break the spirit of the enemy troops, to cause chaos among the civilian population in order to create a mass flight.

Create mass flight, and a community disappears under the rubble.

At an hour’s drive to the east – and a much longer social and political distance from Tel Aviv – the new Palestinian Museum near Ramallah was hosting a collective show called “A People by the Sea,” curated by artist Inass Yassin. As we wandered through this exhibit on Palestine’s coastal cities, pre-1948, Jaffa was prominent, with a display featuring everything from cinema programs to its bustling port life. But we stood the longest time at a work by a Palestinian artist from Jaffa, Amir Nizar Zuabi. On his daily walks by the sea, he collected hundreds of pieces of colored ceramic tile and other detritus thrown back by the sea from the ruins of Manshiya, which he grouped together to produce a map of Jaffa. In contrast to the somber, indeed haunted, black and white photos of Hillel Omer, the documenter and destroyer of Manshiya, Zuabi’s map brought together brightly colored tiles, shards of memory to contemplate as we slowly circled the cartography of that once vibrant Palestinian quarter by the sea.

Every time we drive by the exquisite blue sea, Manshiya will emerge whole in our mind, and as it once was, before the Charles Clore Park was built.

9

Return Is the Way: Kfar Bir’im

Amid the ruins of a destroyed Palestinian village in the upper Galilee stands a Maronite church, Al Sayyeda (“The Lady,” referring to the Virgin Mary). Maronites are eastern Catholics in communion with the Pope but with their own distinct liturgy in Syriac; most prominent in Lebanon, Maronites established villages in the upper Galilee in the eighteenth century. The church is immaculately renovated, with painted walls decorated with icons and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, testament to the life that had once thrived in the northern village of Kfar Bir’im. All around it are partially or fully demolished homes. Kfar Bir’im was a Maronite village seven kilometers from the Lebanese border that was evacuated by the Israeli army in November 1948 and bombed five years later by the Israeli air force in October 1953, destroying much of the village and eradicating earlier promises to the villagers that they could one day return. The church now sits in an Israeli national park – Baram – and next to a kibbutz of the same name.

Kfar Bir’im was a peaceful village whose residents decided to stay out of the fighting during the 1948 war. They believed that in this way they would preserve their village. In November 1948 when they were ordered to evacuate, the Israeli commander promised they could return in “two weeks.” They are still waiting.

We had been meaning to visit the church for several years, ever since we learned from Sharbel Yacoub, whose family is from Kfar Bir'im, that every Saturday former residents and their descendants hold a church service there. They come on Saturday rather than Sunday as it is a day off for workers in Israel. On an unusually hot day in early April, along with our friend Susan, we drove through the forested upper Galilee, finally on our way to the service. Heading north we had often driven along this road, skirting the town of Safed on our way to a walk on Jabal Jarmak (Mount Meron in Hebrew). This is the highest peak in historic Palestine, and a pair of endangered Arabian wolves were sighted there a few years ago. Looking north, one can see Lebanon.

It was proximity to the Lebanese border that sealed the fate not only of Kfar Bir'im but of all of the Palestinian Arab villages there. The Israeli army's Operation Hiram, launched on October 29, 1948, had the explicit aim of evacuating Palestinian Arab villages near the Lebanese border, as well as inflicting a final defeat on the Arab Liberation Army stationed in the upper Galilee. During the sixty-hour operation, the Israeli army drove many thousands of villagers from their homes. It is both heartrending and strange to contemplate the words of the commander of Operation Hiram, General Moshe Carmel, and wonder how he could describe so poignantly the terrible results of his own actions. He wrote at the time: "Women, children, babies, donkeys – everything moves in silence and grief northward …"

Many of these refugees were driven over the border into Lebanon. It was a horrifying time, when Israeli soldiers committed massacres in several Palestinian villages. As we drove to the church service, we passed a kibbutz, Kibbutz Sasa, which, like Kibbutz Baram, has taken the name of the village that once stood there – and where, in an earlier massacre in February 1948, eleven villagers, including five children, lost their lives. North of Kafr Bir'im, in the village of Safsaf, Operation Hiram had a more deadly toll of sixty-one.

The people of Kfar Bir'im had a different fate. As described by a 1942 intelligence memo of the Haganah, the pre-state Zionist military, the peaceful villagers "were far away from politics." During Operation Hiram,

the unarmed residents were allowed to remain in their village. But on November 13, 1948, the Israeli commander ordered them to leave promising a return “in two weeks.” And so commenced a struggle by the displaced villagers (who became Israeli citizens) to earn the right to return, a struggle that has now gone on for some seventy-six years. Even the bombing of the village in 1953 – after the villagers had gone to Israel’s High Court petitioning for return – did not deter them from continuing their campaign. Some of them even watched the destruction from a nearby hill, still called the Wailing Hill, which seems to have strengthened rather than weakened their resolve.

The tragic effect of Operation Hiram still leaves traces on the lovely landscape of the upper Galilee, a ghostly presence that was palpable as we drove through the high hills and oak forests, wondering what we would find, not only of the past and of the people of Kfar Bir’im, but of the present and possible futures. The attendant at the park gate was a Palestinian woman, perhaps only there on Saturdays, who smiled and seemed pleased when we told her we were there to attend the service. She let us enter without paying. We wondered whether she was a descendant of the original residents.

We made our way up to the church, which stands on the highest point on this hill, 750 meters above sea level, enjoying the cool breeze. We could see many visitors, Palestinians and Israeli Jews, all of whom had come to enjoy the cool weather in the surroundings. We passed the remains of an ancient building fronted by tall columns and with an attractive arched doorway, variously claimed as a Roman temple and a Jewish synagogue – in our opinion, quite likely to have been both, as is the case with many of the ruins that dot our land.

We paused before the church as people were hurrying inside. “I haven’t been to a church service in several years,” Penny whispered to Susan. “I hope I still know how to behave.” We entered with our heads slightly bowed and slid into a pew. The church, destroyed by an earthquake on New Year’s Day 1837 and rebuilt in its current shape in 1926, was vandalized by

Jewish settlers in 1949 and 1951. Its walls were cracked during the 1953 bombing and the church bell stolen soon after.

Having finally received permission from the Israeli authorities – after many fruitless petitions – the exiled people of Kfar Bir'im began renovations in 1972. (Before 1966, Palestinians in the Galilee were under military rule and needed a permit to leave their places of residence.) Today, the renovated church was full of light. It was beautiful.

The priest, in his robes and purple cape, began his sermon by marking the month of Lent. He told the story of Jesus curing a blind man when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem from Jericho. In a melodious deep voice, the priest assured the congregation that the time would surely come when those who are blind would have their eyes opened and be able to see the light. His reading of this episode from the Bible mixed phrases from the original Aramaic with Arabic.

Looking around, we found it impressive that the congregation filling the church was made up of both old and young, including numerous teenagers, a cohort not usually found at a morning church service. Members of the church came to the podium to read from the Bible or sing part of the liturgy. One woman, in a pretty red sleeveless dress, had a particularly lovely voice, but everyone did their best. Our host Sharbel, looking determined, gave a reading. At the end, after communion had been taken (with careful Covid restrictions), Sharbel proceeded down the aisle swinging the incense burner so that every pew received a waft of its perfume.

We had been intrigued by a black and white photo on the church wall and went for a closer look. When Sharbel came over to greet us, he was accompanied by a colleague who told us that it was a photo of Kfar Bir'im in 1947. Modest Sharbel, who felt he was not expert enough to explain the story, turned to his colleague, who told us that over a thousand people had lived in Kfar Bar'im in 1948. Most worked in agriculture, and a fortunate few were employed by the Iraqi Petroleum Company, which was headquartered in Haifa and oversaw an oil pipeline that brought crude oil from Kirkuk in Iraq through Jordan and on to Haifa in Palestine. We asked

where Kfar Bir’im residents were today. “Jish,” he said, “and some in Haifa and Acre. Also in Amman and Argentina.” Argentina!

At home, we read of one of the more bizarre Israeli initiatives to rid the land of its Arab population and to “solve” the problem of Kfar Bir’im and defy the Israeli promise of return. Operation Yonatan, also called Operation Mendoza, proposed to transfer residents of Kfar Bir’im from the village of Jish to Argentina. Approved by Israeli prime minister David Ben Gurion in 1952, it succeeded in transferring just twenty-two families. The project, promoted as building “a Kafr Bir’im village in Argentina,” foundered.

As we left the church, we asked Sharbel how he felt to have his village turned into a park. He said “it pains my heart.” But then he added, with a hardly audible whisper, as though he didn’t want to be overheard: “We don’t lose hope.”

We took a steep, rocky path down to the remaining ruins of the village, just to the east of the church. We wondered whether the better-built houses that still had a wall or two standing had belonged to the more affluent villagers, those who had worked for the petroleum company. The paths bristled with overgrown weeds and roots, as well as an occasional flower, covering the surfaces of the remaining stone walls and reminding us of the ruins of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Returning to the church courtyard, we stood and read these words engraved on the courtyard floor several years ago in Arabic: “Return is the way.”

The ruins of Kfar Bir’im village in the Galilee,
destroyed by the Israeli army in 1953 despite a
promise that the villagers could return.

Over the last seventy-six years, there have been no lack of initiatives from the villagers: court cases, petitions, joint marches with Israeli activists, and even, perhaps surprisingly, honest conversations with some of the

residents of Kibbutz Baram who decided that they wanted to know who and what had come before them. Israeli government leaders, at times, have even acknowledged the human suffering of the exiled villagers and have nodded to the justice of the cause of return for Kfar Bir'im. After meeting with delegations of Israeli writers and academics supporting return, Prime Minister Golda Meir said, in 1972: "I do not make light of the feelings of the people of Bir'im … I understand them, and I do not envy them. But I do not accept the argument which states that their case will not set a precedent."

A precedent for justice was, it seems, something that must be adamantly refused.

With the physical presence of the church standing among the village ruins, we wondered what thoughts the former residents of Kfar Bir'im must carry with them every Saturday. Was it, perhaps, pride in having succeeded after so much effort to get permission to renovate and use the church? At the same time there must be grief, and indeed anger, fueled by the sight of the ruined houses that once belonged to them.

Descending to the parking lot we saw throngs of visitors, both foreign and local, who had come to enjoy the pleasant weather on this high ground. For the tourists, especially those who do not know the history of this place, the countryside offers opportunities for walks in well-managed nature reserves, with regulations that are carefully followed. If only these were not built on the ruined villages of another people, Israeli efforts at establishing and maintaining such areas would be admirable.

Driving down another winding road, we stopped for lunch at the village of Jish, where many of the original inhabitants of Kfar Bir'im were banished. Today they constitute one-third of the population of Jish, a densely crowded village with narrow lanes where two cars have difficulty passing and the houses are packed together with hardly a breath of air between them. For those originally from Kfar Bir'im, living in claustrophobic Jish, so close to their cool and spacious village on the hill, must give them, like Sharbel, a constant pain in the heart.

Sharbel's pain is experienced by all Palestinians, despite their differing conditions. For Raja, growing up in Ramallah and hearing his family's stories of their previous life in Jaffa, now on the other side of the border, the imagined past was unchanging, while his family, like other refugees, endured the pain of loss in difficult conditions in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank. For those Palestinians who stayed in Israel it was a much more complex, gruelling and punishing experience. Israel denied what had happened to them in the Nakba, and indeed, many feared telling their children the truth of how it happened. The 165,000 Palestinians who remained in the Israeli state lived under military rule until November 8, 1966. Almost fifty years later, Israeli journalist Adam Raz published findings from a secret codicil to a report on that military government, which "shows unequivocally that a major task of the military government was to act as a means to control the state's lands … until, with state support, Jewish settlement could begin in formerly Arab areas." The parallels with today's land grabs for "security" in the West Bank are obvious.

Over the years we have both known a number of highly successful Palestinians in Israel, at the top of their professions as physicians, engineers, lawyers or scholars. And yet it has always struck Raja that they suffer from a profound dissatisfaction that no measure of success can alleviate, an anger that burns within them, for being cheated of their rights and of having to endure the sight of others exploiting what is theirs and acting as if superior to them. Many have family members in Lebanon and Syria who they can never meet. So they try to compensate for their deprivations, whether that be by working hard to sustain their families or by silencing the past. To no avail. Like those of us under direct occupation, there is always the feeling of something missing. Our memories are not recognized and our lives constrained, whether by direct military occupation or by more subtle forms of inequality.

The day before, we had stopped at another national park in search of the Hayne's iris, known as the Gilboa iris or the Nablus iris in Arabic. This beautiful plant flowers briefly for several weeks in spring on the slopes of Mount Gilboa in the lower Galilee and the plain below. When the

separation wall (known as the apartheid wall) was under construction, some of the plants were moved from the plain – in the occupied West Bank – to Gilboa. We were afraid the irises might have disappeared during this far too early heatwave, but, clambering through a stony field on a hilly slope, we sighted a score of deep purple and black flowers, waving gently in the warm breeze.

Before returning to Ramallah, we decided to take one of our favorite spring walks in the Gamla nature reserve in the occupied Golan Heights. As we drove up the steep road, a deep wadi carved its path down the hill on our northern side. Nearing Gamla, we passed by Ma'ale Gamla, an Israeli settlement situated on the site of the destroyed Syrian Druze village of Khukha, formerly the home to 343 people who Israel forced to move when they conquered the Golan in June 1967. Nowhere could we be innocent tourists in our quest for spring flowers.

The Gamla nature reserve sits high on a rocky outcrop, with one path leading below to yet another archaeological ruin of an ancient city. More striking to our eyes were the monuments that are much older still – Neolithic stone dolmens – that stand along a path to a lovely high waterfall. In the end we decided to take another trail that skirts a deep wadi where a stream flows down to Lake Tiberias. We walked among carpets of spring wildflowers: red anemones, pink cranesbills and speedwells, yellow flowers of all descriptions, blue bugloss and lupine, and small violet irises. Dazed from the profusion of beauty, we sat on a rock overlooking the wadi. Susan, our companion and a serious birdwatcher, raised her binoculars, "Look," she said, "an Egyptian vulture."

When we remarked how we'd often seen these vultures at Gamla, she gently corrected us: "You probably mean Griffon vultures. Egyptian vultures are quite rare." Yes, we acknowledged, in past times it must have been Griffon vultures. Each spring, they come to nest in nooks on the steep wall of a cliff at Gamla. But these magnificent birds themselves became rare when a mass vulture poisoning in 2019 – presumably by Israeli cattle ranchers in the Golan setting out a poisoned cow carcass to eradicate Arabian wolves (themselves endangered) – threatened their very existence.

But, as we continued to look at the cloudless sky, Griffon vultures were also back with us, soaring overhead on the currents of air, in a sky that belongs to no one but them.

“Return is the Way” in Arabic, engraved on the courtyard near the restored Maronite church of Kfar Bir’im.

And then Susan raised her binoculars higher. “Fifty of them,” she exclaimed, “Eagles!” Our eyes, unaided, did not see them as they flew away, but we felt uplifted: spring with carpets of flowers returning from the soil and magnificent birds returning to the skies overhead. And we thought of the words of Father Yusuf in 1948 when refugees from other villages were streaming through Kfar Bir’im on their way to exile in Lebanon. He said: “Here we stay, here we remain.”

Return is the way.

10

It Won’t Go Away: Qibya and the Massacre

On our way to the village of Qibya in search of memories, or memorials, of a massacre that took place there in 1953, we were suddenly immersed in the sight of blossoming almond trees. Their pure white blossoms hanging on black branches bore just a glimpse of pink, and were standing amid olive orchards and terraced hills. It is easy to forget, in built-up Ramallah, how beautiful Palestine can be in early spring. Almond trees blossom earlier than other trees and we were more than ready for rejuvenation after a winter hibernation compounded by pandemic fears.

But when we approached the village the picture changed. We had been free to regard the beauty of the blossoms as Bassam was at the wheel, and, with his expertise in Palestinian geography, he knew both the new roads and the ancient landscapes. Leaving both, we took the turning to Shuqba, a neighboring village and the only northern access to Qibya. Trucks followed us up the dusty road before they turned off on a side road that led to a quarry and a garbage dump. We could barely make out the small footpath that led to an important neolithic cave below the village, which we had explored so many years ago.

Driving through Shuqba’s narrow winding alleys with care, we emerged on the road to Qibya. “I have never seen so many smashed cars,” Penny

remarked – and that's in Palestine, where smashed cars are not an infrequent sight. But these piles of rusty vehicles, stripped of any useful parts, came one after another as we drove along the road, an eerie echo of the Roman columns that decorated the Appian Way, where we had walked in a happier springtime in Italy some years ago.

Perhaps the devastation was a fitting entrance to a village that had suffered, and may never have fully recovered from, the events of October 14, 1953. On that evening, Israeli soldiers from Unit 101, the commando unit led by Ariel Sharon, in addition to a paratroop unit and a mortar unit, attacked Qibya, a Palestinian village located near the new border between Israel and Jordan (then controlling the West Bank and thus Qibya). They left seventy-seven people dead out of a village population of around 200, and about fifty homes, a mosque and two schools were destroyed by explosives. For Israel's Central Command, who issued orders for "destruction and maximum killing with the aim of driving inhabitants of the village from their homes," it was a revenge attack, with perhaps the added goal of clearing a village on their border. On October 12, "infiltrators" from the Jordanian side had crossed the border and lobbed a grenade into a house in Yehud near Tel Aviv, killing an Israeli woman and two of her children. Israeli soldiers followed the tracks of the men to the outskirts of the village of Rantis, north of Qibya, and then lost the trail. Severe retaliation against Qibya (without any evidence of villagers' participation in the Yehud attack) was ordered despite the head of Jordan's Arab Legion, the British officer John Glubb Pasha, affirming that he would help catch the perpetrators.

The denials and contradictory narratives that raged in Israel following the massacre were harbingers of much that has followed, with the Israeli military initially claiming that no soldiers had left their base that evening. But the history of this duplicity was not our focus: we wanted to find out how people in Qibya remembered and commemorated a heart-rending event. At the center of Qibya, we came upon our first memorial. In the middle of a roundabout, a plinth stood commemorating the martyrs who died that October evening. Erected fairly recently, it was curiously unmoving. Topped by a brightly colored image in the colors of the

Palestinian flag, it featured blood dripping from the number 53 (for the year in which it happened) under the arch of a destroyed house. Rather than a sobering memorial, the style was that of a political cartoon in the venerable Palestinian newspaper *Al Quds*. A more elegant Quranic verse ran down the side of the plinth, but the names of the dead were absent. Below was an announcement that the memorial was erected in 2019, and we wondered whether this was a gesture from the Palestinian Authority rather than a community initiative.

Plinth erected in Qibya commemorating the villagers killed in October 1953 by Ariel Sharon's Unit 101.

We approached an older man with a white skull cap who was sunning himself in front of a friend's shop to ask if there were other traces of the massacre.

“I will show you, come with me,” Muhammad Abu Saleh said. “Come along,” he urged, “it’s nearby.”

Following his lead, we picked our way over a field with stone slabs and patches of wild grasses. “Here it is,” he said. “Lift the rock.”

We obediently lifted a heavy rock. Underneath, a small white bone gleamed, almost as if someone had polished it.

“Their house was here, they were refugees.” Abu Saleh said. “Fourteen people were killed when the Israeli soldiers exploded it. They were buried in the well.”

—

Over a decade ago, in 2009, we attended an exhibition entitled “Buried” at Edinburgh’s Fruitmarket Gallery. Northern Ireland artist Willie Doherty’s camera roamed over trees and tangled undergrowth, occasionally revealing an old jacket on the ground or other human debris. He was filming as he walked along a disused railway track in Derry, where some of the victims of Bloody Sunday had fallen, an event he had witnessed as a young teen. On that Sunday in January 1972, British soldiers opened fire on unarmed civilians during a protest march, killing twenty-six. There were no words in Doherty’s powerful, haunting film, but he wrote a poetic afterword in the catalogue that resonated with us, and resonates in Qibya, looking at a small white bone. He wrote:

In front of my eyes and yet unseen
The small traces of human presence

Fog drifting

Impossible to escape

The problem with forgetting
The problem with remembering

Abu Saleh showing us the burial place of a family of refugees.

Leaving this haunted field, we asked Abu Saleh about the memorial plinth. “There used to be a beautiful tree there,” he said sadly. Clearly, the new memorial failed to stir him. Later, Bassam found an earlier photograph of the tree; Abu Saleh was right. The tree was lovely and a living tree from

that time would have been a more appropriate commemoration than the artless monument.

But the terrible memories of that evening also needed a human witness, a voice. Given the sheer passage of time, we could only hope that there were still elders in the village who had witnessed the massacre. Abu Saleh said that he would lead us to the municipal council where perhaps the village authorities could help us.

Walking with him in Qibya's narrow streets and alleys, we had to be careful to dodge cars driven at high speed by youngsters, many of them unlicensed. We skirted a desolate pit, a house with crumbling walls and loose wires at its side, and were walking up a steep alley when Abu Saleh stopped at a darkened doorway. "I have to take care of my son," he said. "This is my house, come in for coffee." We apologized and then looked up the stairs. His adult son stood at the top, clearly disabled and partly in the dark. A poor family in a village on the margins. More than the massacre is hidden in the shadows of Qibya.

We found the head of the municipal council in his office – another piece of good fortune was that we had arrived on a public holiday, Israa' and Miraj, which celebrates Prophet Muhammad's ascent to heaven, so the official was not at his other job as a healthcare worker in Ramallah. As in all such offices, large photographs of Yasser Arafat and Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority's president since the last election in January 2005) graced the otherwise empty walls.

We were ushered into his office, along with his colleague, Abu Rizeq, a stocky man with a cheerful air, where we found the municipal head's young daughter occupying his chair – it was a holiday for all. We explained our mission and there was a moment of silence. Penny interrupted it with a question.

"What is the main problem the municipality is facing?"

He became animated: "Roads, roads are our main problem."

We could only nod in agreement, having zigzagged in our car and on foot over crumbling roads. It was a reminder that, for the living, there were

other preoccupations, and that our search for remembrance of the dead might not be high on the agenda.

And to compound the difficulties, as the council head told us, many of the original inhabitants had fled in the 1967 war. “There are more people from Qibya in Amman than here,” he said. In that brief war, Qibya was not a scene of fighting but we understood that it was the memories of the earlier massacre that had propelled those villagers to flee.

“There is one old man who was alive at the time,” he said. “But you must not ask Abu Ibrahim his age,” he added with a chuckle.

After coffee, he asked his colleague to take us first to another elder, Abu Mahmoud, and then on to the more famous Abu Ibrahim.

We also asked to see the Mosque of the Martyrs and the cemetery where many of the victims are buried. “You will find Abu Mahmoud across from the cemetery,” said Abu Rizeq, “I will take you there.”

We circled the Mosque of the Martyrs, an impressive rectangular building, its roof graced not only with a minaret but also edged with a series of stone triangles – crenellated – a feature usually associated with defensive architecture and castle battlements. On the wall, a Quranic verse urged prayer and alms.

We sat on the terrace of a shop across from the cemetery with its several rows of somber graves and a plaque announcing that this memorial was erected by students from a nearby school in 2012. The tombstones were orderly, engraved with the names of the victims and a Quranic verse. We wondered why the refugee family remained buried in the well, nameless and forgotten, but hesitated to ask.

After another round of coffee, Abu Mahmoud told us of his own losses – losses that occurred before his birth but vivid from the tales of his elders: three brothers, and a wife of a brother who was pregnant. “Ariel Sharon,” he intones. “Ariel Sharon.” He provided a general account of the entrance of the Israeli soldiers from several directions and then fell silent. Having told us of his dead, that was enough for him, and he turned to chat with the two other older men sitting on plastic chairs around him in the sun.

As we walked with Abu Rizeq from the municipality, he chatted about Ramallah, where he was a contractor for many years, and he and Raja locate a connection. “I lived near your family,” he tells Raja, “I knew your father.” And so we trod along, dodging the occasional truck on the narrow road, Abu Rizeq encouraging us. “It’s not much further. Abu Ibrahim lives near my house.”

Plaque on the Qibya cemetery wall honoring the seventy-seven villagers killed in the 1953 massacre.

Abu Ibrahim’s house rests behind a concrete wall, with an unkempt field before it. We sat under a sun umbrella and Abu Ibrahim joined us, neat in a navy tracksuit and polished slippers, with a red checked keffiyeh around his neck. A tall, slim man, with elegant long fingers, he sat upright on the white plastic chair gesturing with his long arms as he spoke to us of

his life and memories for two hours without stopping. He seemed to have perfect eyesight and a sharp mind. A young boy with a shy smile brought rounds of coffee and tea.

Abu Ibrahim was a boy of perhaps twelve years old (we were obedient and did not ask his age) when the massacre occurred and his family managed to flee their house before it was blown to bits by the soldiers. But his memories were not always that of a young boy. Sometimes we could hear that traumatized child speak, but often his voice was that of the committed, well-organized teacher he had been for so many years, the details he provided drawn not just from his own experience but from the stories of family members and from his assiduous reading. We marveled at his excellent memory as he strove to teach us how the terrible events of 1953 were shaped by the powerful – not just the brutal actions of Ariel Sharon and his commandos but also the betrayal of Glubb Pasha, the British head of Jordan's Arab Legion who had done nothing to protect the village.

He carefully enunciated the date – October 14, 1953 – and described what happened to him and his family:

> We were awakened by heavy thumping on the door: "Open, open." We at first refused to open but then saw it was my sister's husband, looking for his wife who was staying with us. He warned us that the soldiers were going from house to house. "We must leave now," he urged. "Do not delay." We first went to Shuqba and then to Deir Ammar camp. From there, we could see the horizon ablaze from the explosions.

These tragic events, in his view, were unredeemed by the funds that poured into the village to reconstruct the mosque and schools, one of which is named Pakistani for its donors. Over the years other funds that were promised to revive the village – and provide it with new roads – never seemed to materialize.

When we returned from the village to Ramallah, it was time to meet some of our family members who we had not seen since Christmas – two

months ago. Hanan, Samer, Tala and Aziz live down the street from us but Covid had kept them isolated from us for far too long.

A reunion dinner was perhaps not the most appropriate time to bring up the massacre but it was on our minds.

“Do you know what happened in Qibya?” we asked our nephew and niece, both in their mid-twenties. Aziz and Tala said no and Tala added that she didn’t know where Qibya was. Hanan, their mother, said that she knew about the massacre. Like Raja, a generation before her, she had learned about it in school. But now, it seems, Qibya has been erased from the school curriculum in Palestine, and for most younger Palestinians the events of that October evening lie forgotten.

But even as we register the Qibya massacre within the long line of painful events in Palestine, we must also admit that we ourselves had never been to contemporary Qibya, although it is only eleven kilometers from Ramallah. Just as the events of 1953 seem to have been forgotten by the students, so today’s Qibya seems ever further from the orbit of bustling Ramallah.

Driving home from our dinner through congested Ramallah, dodging SUVs rather than the broken-down and unlicensed cars in Qibya, we discussed Abu Ibrahim’s criticism of our leaders, not only for the less than innovative school curriculum but for their larger defeats. Indeed, he uttered the acerbic conclusion that Palestine has been lost. Reflecting not just on his words but on his resolute character, we remain interested in losses that can be recovered, and memories that can be restored. Qibya will not go away. In the words, once again, of Willie Doherty:

After all these years

Dark

It won’t go away
No matter how it’s reshaped

Distorted

Concealed

Buried

PART FOUR

Intimations of Mortality

I have work to do on the geography of volcanoes
From desolation to ruin
From the time of Lot to Hiroshima
As if I never yet lived …

Mahmoud Darwish, “Mural”

11

The Graves of Poets: Rashid Hussein, Mahmoud Darwish, Kamal Boullata

The older we grow – both of us now in our seventies – the more we experience the demise of our contemporaries and friends and feel our own mortality.

It was February when we went to visit Rashid Hussein's grave on a hill in the Galilean village of Musmus in the Haifa District. Musmus is divided by a four-lane highway and we puzzled over our direction, finally chosing Musmus West. Contemplating the village's thread-like narrow alleys and crowded houses, we asked a man working on his truck, who said: "Go up the hill and look for the biggest tombstone. That will be him."

The poet Rashid Hussein would have smiled and perhaps shrugged his shoulders at this, his elevation to the biggest marker of death in his native village. In his all too brief life (1936–77), his poetry and prose were the opposite of grandiose. His poem to his illiterate peasant mother reads:

No one taught you to read, mother!
But all taught you not to read.
That is why

I always try
To set
My poems
To simple words.

Rashid’s grave was raised slightly above the others, in a peaceful graveyard that overlooked Wadi Ara. His tomb lay by his father’s smaller grave. Both were well-tended. In and around the graveyard the almond trees, so beloved by the poet, were already in bloom. Neither of us are fond of visiting graves, even of those to whom we had a close attachment, and we had no prayers for the dead. But the work and life of Rashid had special resonance for us. We discovered that Musmus had few attributes of a thriving village – its agricultural lands were mainly appropriated by Israel in 1948. Rashid had matured there under military occupation, until 1966, and its contemporary existence like many villages in our area of the West Bank is to serve as a dormitory town for laborers working outside the village.

Grave of poet Rashid Hussein in the Galilee village of Musmus.

It has been over forty years since Raja first encountered the work of Rashid Hussein. In 1979 he was visiting his friend, the artist Kamal Boullata, in the United States, just as Kamal was launching the book of essays commemorating the poet, entitled *The World of Rashid Hussein*, which he edited with Mirene Ghossein.

That event was Raja's first introduction to the world of Israeli/ Palestinian interaction, which Rashid Hussein seemed to be fostering even after his death. Growing up in the West Bank, Raja had neither heard of Rashid Hussein nor was he familiar with his poetry. That launch was Raja's first opportunity to enter the poet's rich and varied world.

The speakers at the event included Israelis, Palestinians and American Jews. Some were colleagues, both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, with whom Rashid had worked before he left Musmus in 1966 to live in the US

with his Jewish bride; others became his close friends in his American surroundings. As one speaker followed another, Raja realized what a crucial part the man had played in the lives of all these friends, many of whom contributed moving essays to the book.

Edward Said, who dedicated his own book *The Question of Palestine*, to Rashid, described how it was from him he "learned whatever I know about life in Palestinian villages after 1948, a life which informs the question of Palestine with unique strength. His generosity of spirit, openness, and political honesty were his gifts to everyone he met … Rashid Hussein [has] illuminated for me the Palestinian cause to which … [he] gave his life."

These sentiments were felt beyond the poet's Palestinian acquaintances. Israeli journalist and activist Uri Avnery described Rashid Hussein as "the first Arab poet in the State of Israel, the gentle soul who didn't know how to hate." And in his essay, the crusading American journalist I. F. Stone wrote:

> It seems as if there are forces in Israel which fear the Arab friend more than the Arab terrorist. They broke his heart. They suffocated his spirit. They tore him from the roots which nourished his muse. They killed him, and they will kill the chances of peace if we let them, if we forget Rashid, who let us see that we have kindred spirits among our Arab brothers that a life in common is possible.

In time we both became more familiar with Rashid's poetry and his difficult life in New York, after his painful separation from his wife. He reluctantly volunteered his services to the Arab League at the United Nations (as well as the Palestine Liberation Organization, which then had no official presence) but had written "Thought Forbidden Here" over a map of the Arab world on a wall in his apartment. He died in an alcohol-fueled sleep, his ubiquitous smoldering cigarette setting his bed alight. The poet whose body was consumed in flames had written:

> The oven has devoured all
> That I own of this earth

Nothing remains of my country
Except myself.

Raja had returned from the United States buoyed by intimations of a possible new beginning between the Palestinians and their enemies. That sweet hope persisted, with many ups and downs, until 1993, when it was decisively dashed by the signing of the Oslo Accords. The Accords ushered in a period that reconfigured the relationship between Israel and Palestine, basing it on walls and separation, control, and the total domination and confiscation of the majority of Palestinian land. Under these conditions Rashid and what he stood for were all but forgotten.

After his early tragic death in 1977, Rashid's body was brought to his birthplace in Musmus to be buried there. Thousands attended the funeral, including mayors of towns in the occupied West Bank and representatives of Jenin and other refugee camps, as well as Palestinians and Israelis from across the Galilee. A sign, posted at the graveyard read, "Rashid Hussein Welcomes You."

Visiting Musmus and witnessing what has become of this Palestinian village in Israel brought us closer to the sobering realization that perhaps a similar fate awaited the Palestinian villages in the West Bank. Like Musmus, many villages in the occupied West Bank have had their agricultural land confiscated and their residents turned into laborers, working in Israel or building Jewish settlements in the West Bank. This seems inexorable and unstoppable. The hope of a common future for Israelis and Palestinians that Rashid called for has turned sour and the hatred between the two sides seems only to have grown with time. Today, we treasure our old friendships with Israeli friends, all of us aging, all of us with histories as peace activists and human rights defenders, as we communicate across the barriers that divide us. Our encounters, rarer now, are tinged with despair. John Berger, in his conversations with Palestinians during his visit to the West Bank in 2005, characterized their attitude as "undefeated despair." We try to hold on to "undefeated."

Five years after the birth of Rashid Hussein, another great Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, was born in the village of Birwah, not far from Musmus. There are several ways in which the lives of the two poets intersect. Both became fed up with life in Israel and left to join the PLO outside. Both remained attached to their land and suffered the pain of exile. And both died in the United States, Mahmoud in 2008 in a hospital in Houston after undergoing heart surgery. But unlike Rashid, whose body was brought for burial to his original village, Mahmoud was buried in Ramallah, where he was allowed to return by the Israeli authorities after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. He was not, however, permitted to live in his native Galilee. We often met him in the course of the constitutional walks he took upon the advice of his doctor. We were not aware, however, of the seriousness of his heart condition.

In 2002, with Ramallah under Israeli military siege during the second Palestinian intifada, Mahmoud came to our house for a visit. He lived nearby and we often walked by his apartment building, glad that the tall pine trees and the birds that flock there have survived Ramallah's continuing urban sprawl. That day in 2002, during the Israeli re-invasion of Ramallah, Mahmoud was uneasy away from his home; our streets could be dangerous and an Israeli tank could lumber its way toward a lone walker.

Nonetheless, our conversation touched upon many aspects of his life and work. Raja asked him where was it that he felt most at home: in Ramallah or Galilee? His answer did not surprise us. He said: "Galilee is my home. My personality was formed there. My personal nation is there. I have feelings for the place, for its hills and rocks and plants and sunsets." Then he added, "Yet it is not possible for me to be in Galilee, and I am resigned to never making it my home again."

We were curious to know why, living in alien Ramallah, he did not leave.

Mahmoud answered: "I sometimes ask myself the same question. The first motivation for staying is moral. I still suffer from doubts concerning my first departure from Palestine, when I left my village in the Galilee. I continue to ask myself, was it right to leave? I cannot repeat that mistake. I

don’t feel I should waste that opportunity even if I am not convinced about the usefulness of the process that brought me back. I have strong doubts whether this process can lead to full independence.”

Grave of poet Mahmoud Darwish in Ramallah, far from his native Galilee village of Al Birwah.

He concluded by saying: “I shall only be liberated from Palestine when Palestine is liberated. Then it shall no longer be a condition to be here in Palestine in order to write.” Raja told Mahmoud that he felt exactly the same way.

But how did his return affect his poetry, we asked?

His answer was surprising. In Ramallah, he first wrote a volume of love poetry, in order, he said, “to liberate myself from what is expected of me –

that I am a Palestinian poet who must write about my return to Palestine. So I didn't write about this. I wrote about love."

During those five years in Ramallah, Mahmoud also wrote his long poem, "Mural," a dialogue with death that, he said quietly, "arose out of a personal experience with death," his first heart attack in 1997, a near-death experience.

We were in Scotland in 2008, in the peaceful surroundings of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, when an Arab journalist and writer, Abdel Bari Atwan, rushed over to us. "Mahmoud is dead," he said, wiping away a tear, "We have lost Mahmoud." It came as a complete shock even though we were aware that he had gone to Houston in Texas for a heart operation. We had failed to realize how critical his condition was.

A week later, we sat in the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh for a performance we had much anticipated but now approached with a heavy heart: the Palestinian National Theater was staging "Mural" (*Jidariyya*), a play based on Mahmoud's poem and featuring one of Palestine's leading actors, Makram Khoury, as the half-conscious poet on a narrow bed, haunted by his memories and regrets in a dialogue with death. In the poem Mahmoud addresses death, pleading:

> Death wait for me Death
> till I clear my mind in Spring
> and regain my health
> then you'll be the noble hunter who doesn't kill the gazelle while it's drinking

But this was not to be. Death refused to wait. Darwish's body is now buried not in his village of Birwah in the Galilee but in Ramallah, atop a hill overlooking the city. In a recent visit to his grave, we stood before the imposing structure of his mausoleum, looking at an engraving in stone that reads, in English, "From Palestine to Mahmoud Darwish," and in Arabic, "From the Nation to Mahmoud Darwish." On the wall of the mausoleum is also written, "From Ramallah to Mahmoud Darwish." The city has claimed

him. In an attempt to bring his village closer to Ramallah, the garden as well as a theater adjoining the grave are called El Birwah. Palestinian flags flutter all around.

We wondered what Mahmoud would have thought of his memorial. In “Mural,” he wrote, “No life is long enough for me to join my end to my beginning.” Probably he would have appreciated the smaller, quieter memorial stone painted by Scottish artist Peter White and placed on a stone terrace above a wadi, with its red hibiscus flower that will gradually fade away. After all, Mahmoud had told us:

> Palestine is the group homeland, but my personal homeland is where I can interpret and understand every flower; it is the place where I grew up.

The artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, who had so beautifully commemorated Rashid and was a friend of Mahmoud, had his own sad commemoration in the summer of 2019. When we had visited him in his home in Berlin during the final years of his life, we couldn’t help noticing how he was working very hard on his projects, both of painting and writing, as though he was in a race against time. His art – abstract, often calligraphic, filled with light – was wide-ranging but often came back to the city of his birth and where he lived until his mid-twenties: Jerusalem. Like many Palestinians, Kamal was trapped outside Jerusalem during the 1967 war and was later denied residency by Israel in the city he loved.

Kamal left Jerusalem for the United States only ever to return for short visits. We were again in Edinburgh when we heard of his untimely death in his exiled city of Berlin. It was sudden and came to us as a complete shock. We were particularly distressed that we couldn’t attend his funeral in Jerusalem. Thanks to the efforts of our mutual friend, Jonathan Kuttab, and several of Kamal’s activist relatives, a rare permission was obtained from the Israeli authorities to transport his body from Berlin to Jerusalem for burial there.

Jerusalem was his city. He never lost his Jerusalem accent and the city continued to provide him with inspiration for his art. Yet the Jerusalem that we walked through in June 2022 to get to his grave was one that Kamal would hardly have recognized. We entered through Jaffa Gate and immediately saw the shuttered windows of the Imperial Hotel that had recently been acquired, against the will of the Palestinian hotel operator, by the Jewish group Ateret Cohanim, which settles Jews in the Old City and other parts of eastern Jerusalem. Many of the shops near Jaffa Gate that used to be Arab-owned were now in Israeli hands. The atmosphere was no longer the congenial one from years past, with young men sitting in the cafés playing backgammon, sipping Turkish coffee, talking loudly and laughing. Instead there were groups of tourists, with their Israeli guides, pointing out the Jewish features of the city and ferrying them along quickly to allow for other groups, all under the careful watch of the Israeli police.

Unfinished grave of artist Kamal Boullata in the Greek Orthodox cemetery on Jerusalem's Mount Zion. Exiled from his beloved Jerusalem since 1967, he came home only in death.

We made our way through the crowds to the Armenian quarter where we met a historian friend who had worked at the Armenian Patriarchate and saw conspiracies everywhere. He took us to a shady spot to update us in a whisper on the latest attempts by the Jerusalem Municipality to take over more land belonging to the Patriarchate. It was difficult to escape the feeling that the Palestinian people and places of the Old City of Jerusalem were under continuous threat.

When we walked up Mount Zion to the gates of the Greek Orthodox Cemetery, we found them locked. After knocking on several iron gates, a bent old caretaker finally admitted us, grumbling that we had arrived after eleven o'clock when the cemetery is officially closed to the public. He gave directions to Kamal's grave and sank back into his plastic chair.

The unadorned grave of Kamal lies in the shade of a large pine tree. He was surrounded by other members of his family and close to the famous Palestinian scholar and author of the classic work *The Arab Awakening*, George Antonius. As we stood before the grave thinking of Kamal, with his dimpled cheeks and love of life, the bells of the Dormition Abbey began to toll. We could still hear Kamal's voice and his deep-throated laugh. If the dead could speak, Kamal, to whom Israel denied residency, would have said: here I am, home again.

12

The Shining Dead Sea: Beauty and Loss

On the day after Christmas 2022, it rained heavily. We had planned to drive from Ramallah in the central highlands to the Dead Sea – its surface and shores 427 meters below sea level – but with the many flash floods reported in the wadis that run down to the sea, we had decided to postpone our trip.

For the past four years we've had heavy winter rains, but their effect on the level of the water in the Dead Sea has been negligible. In 2022, the sea dropped by 1.27 meters, 11 centimeters more than the year before. For the past thirty years, Dead Sea water levels have been dropping at an average rate of one meter per year. For many decades, our visits had offered us beauty, space and comfort. But now, on the eve of the new year, we approached our first post-pandemic visit with trepidation, wondering what we would find.

A tideless inland sea, situated at the lowest point of the Great Rift Valley – indeed its shores are the lowest landforms on earth – the Dead Sea is a vulnerable body of water. It was formed when the two tectonic plates pulled apart, forming this portion of the Great Rift Valley, which stretches from southern Turkey to Mozambique. The Dead Sea nestles between the Moab mountains on the eastern shore and the cliffs that rise above our western shores, where we have spent so many memorable times.

Our visits to a public beach there in the 1980s – the Ein Gedi Beach – where friends often gathered, enjoying each other's company and the sensation of floating on the salty water of this most mysterious of seas, were idyllic. Many Palestinian families floated and picnicked on this beach on a lovely sandy stretch of coastline that could be reached from the West Bank after 1967 and the building of a new road by Israel several years afterward.

Today, an Israeli checkpoint blocks those families and most of our friends with West Bank identity cards from traveling there. The beach itself is forbidden to all, as sinkholes, those markers of climate change that is eroding the land around the receding Dead Sea, are a new form of danger. The massive diversions of the Jordan River, the main source of water for the Dead Sea, except for the winter rains, brings only a trickle to the northern shores. Meanwhile, mineral-extracting industries utilize even more of the sea's waters. In retreat, the sea leaves behind salt deposits that in turn collapse into huge craters, some as deep as 150 meters and twice as wide. These sinkholes are not always immediately visible and number at least 6,000 at the last count. Forty years ago there were none.

Nonetheless, in the last days of the year, when the rains had lifted but Ramallah remained engulfed in mist and cold, the Dead Sea beckoned. Driving there now, older and in these darker times, we were unsure if the magic of those earlier visits by the vanishing sea could be recaptured.

At the halfway point on the way from Jerusalem, we were relieved that the gaily-decorated tourist camel that marks sea level was back on duty by the side of the road, ready for the tourists to sit on and memorialize their visit. It was a welcome sign that we were emerging from the pandemic years during which few tourists had visited. A short distance later, the first glimpse of the water came into view. That first sighting always comes as a surprise because of the contrast between the blue water and the arid Jerusalem wilderness.

In Raja's childhood, a congregation of camels could be found on the empty plot on the righthand side of the road near the intersection to the Dead Sea, waiting to participate in the popular camel races that took place

during Jordan’s rule over the West Bank. Now the only camels here are tourist attractions.

To the left, we looked at a derelict roofless building, surrounded by litter and some distance from the shore. This was the ruin of the Lido, established in the early sixties and a favorite haunt for Palestinian families before the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. One of Raja’s most cherished childhood memories was going to this northern tip of the Dead Sea with his family on moonlight nights. His family would park by the Lido beach and walk a short distance to the sea. One of their friends, Olive George, was fond of playing the accordion and she would bring it along. Those were magical evenings, with the light of the full moon shimmering over the waveless calm sea. The Lido Restaurant nearby was often busy with happy diners.

Now the Lido is only the name of a gas station café at the intersection. We walked through the café, which was full of Israelis, along with a smattering of Palestinian families from Israel. Most of the workers were Palestinians from Jericho. There was the sound of both Arabic and Hebrew, but it was mainly Hebrew that we heard spoken, loudly. This was a popular, noisy place. But after we used the facilities at the gas station, we didn’t have the heart to stop and walk up the access road to the original Palestinian-owned Lido. We didn’t want the disappointing sight to mar our enjoyment of the day. “We’ll stop on the way back,” Raja said, “after the Dead Sea and a walk at the Ein Gedi nature reserve lifts our winter gloom.”

And there it was – the sea water glinting pale blue and turning to turquoise as the sun struck, the pink cliffs of the Moab mountains rising on the eastern Jordanian side. Even though we knew all too well the cascade of fact after fact on the relentless shrinking of the Sea, we put the latest alarming news aside for a moment to soak in the beauty, if not yet the salt of the saltiest water on the planet – ten times the salt of the ocean. The shores were bedecked with signs warning of the sinkholes. But how to heed the warning? We knew there was nothing we could do because if the ground was to fall underneath our feet – or worse, our car – it would do so suddenly

and without warning. Sinkholes are expected to double in the next two years.

Shore of the shrinking Dead Sea with a sign warning of danger from sinkholes.

Indeed, the news was hard to ignore. The sea we were looking at on our winter excursion was as far away as our own youthful hopes and energies. But, we reminded ourselves, the Dead Sea is the youngest large body of water in the world – *only* 12,000 years old. Its immediate predecessor, the Lisan Lake, formed 70,000 years ago and, stretching beyond Tiberias, was six times as long as the present lake. The cliffs that captured our imagination – both the eastern Moab mountains and the cliffs of the Jerusalem wilderness behind us – were so much older. The Nubian red sandstone coating the Moab cliffs is some 400 million years old, more ancient than the Rift Valley itself, which was formed three million years ago. Geological time, hard to fathom, is important to contemplate, since we humans, in our Anthropocene epoch, speed onward to catastrophe after catastrophe. It is a comfort as well as a challenge to our narrow focus on our terrestrial planet.

We reach the Ein Gedi nature reserve, a magnificent oasis with four springs in two canyons that rise above the Dead Sea in a series of waterfalls. Over many decades, the reserve and its walks had been a sanctuary for us, as well as for wildlife – the agile Nubian ibexes, the stately wild goats that haunt the cliffs above the Dead Sea, and the hyraxes, humble coneys that find refuge in its bushes and rock crevasses. The Arabian leopard that once prowled there has been declared extinct, felled by hunting, although one lone male was sighted near the southern Dead Sea in 2017.

We had not ventured to Ein Gedi during the peak pandemic years, feeling almost extinct ourselves, and our return was a revival. It is always hard to choose which of the two canyons to explore but we went for the one with the most striking waterfalls – Wadi Sidar (after the jujube tree) in Arabic or Wadi David (after King David) in Hebrew. We were not alone in our choice, as American and Japanese tourists strode forth and groups of Israeli teens descended from numerous tourist buses. No wonder, we thought, that the wise ibexes chose cliffs too high for clumsy humans to traverse. We are a very noisy species.

Nonetheless, as we walked up a series of carved stone steps along the waterfalls – thanking the reserve rangers for the handy rails – the chatter receded and the sound of water took over. Ein Gedi was still a refuge. Resting by a pool, we scanned the cliffs above for ibexes but saw only the jagged rocks and a clear winter sky. Turning her attention to a rustling beside us, Penny whispered: “Look, a hyrax,” but found Raja’s reply disappointing: “I’ve seen a million hyraxes.” While it is true that a hyrax looks like a cross between a rat and a rodent, it does have noble relatives: elephants, rhinoceros and horses occupy the same family of odd-toed ungulates. So there, Raja, noted Penny.

Putting squabbling aside, we descended reluctantly for a less elevated mission: to find the location of the Ein Gedi public beach of the 1980s and investigate its terrain today to try to understand the future of the Dead Sea. Leaving the reserve, we hesitantly crossed two traffic circles on the new road built and rebuilt to avoid encroaching sinkholes, some of which are large enough to swallow an errant car. We considered a long stretch of terrain behind a new bus stop, littered with huge chunks of rock, but dismissed it as too high above the sea to have ever been a beach. And then, turning away, we saw it: a stretch of old abandoned road edged by planted palms and a sizable flattened shore: our beach! “But look, look,” Raja said excitedly. A group of gazelles had come down from a hill near the reserve, jumped a fence, crossed the new road, and were heading for the shore, not a place usually frequented by mountain gazelles who, like the ibexes, prefer the heights. What were they doing there? The slender gazelles were in a line as they walked along the shore, picking their way over sinkholes, heading for a group of date palms. And then, trying to think like a gazelle, we began to understand. The two stands of date palms near the reserve had been fenced in on the side near the road – preventing us foolish humans from entering and encountering sinkholes. There must be no fencing, or a gap at least, on the side near the shore, from where the gazelles could enter and find one of their favorite foods. Several years ago, proposals to fence off the date palms had encountered opposition because ibexes also relied on these trees for food. Hopefully, ibexes have also figured out a way to circumvent

human planning. While it is highly unlikely that we will ever be able to enjoy the beach again, we left with the hope that ibexes and gazelles would continue to find their way to graze among the date palms.

Heading home, we enjoyed the changing color of the water as the setting sun hit the Moab mountains and was reflected in pink streaks on the water. When we arrived at the northern tip of the sea, we headed for the Old Lido. It was time to walk up the deserted road and visit the ruin.

We found the building derelict, with two side walls still intact overlooking the distant sea like a gaping monster staring blankly as it retreated, now several miles away. On the steps leading down to the desolate stretch of rocky beach sat a group of young men and women who, laughing and talking excitedly, were evidently smoking marijuana. They stopped when they heard us approach, perhaps worried at our reaction. Looking at them, we realized they were too young to have known of this sea in its former glory, so we walked on, leaving them in peace to enjoy what there was of the vanishing waters.

When we headed back to chilly Ramallah, what remained with us was not the danger of falling into sinkholes along the shore but the spectacular coastline, with its crystalized salt deposits forming varied shapes, sometimes like weird caves and sometimes like stalagmites. A few months later, we visited a new exhibition at the Israel Museum entitled “The Burning Sea,” by the Israeli artist Sigalit Landau. We wanted to see what this artist made of these mysterious formations. She had spent many years at the Dead Sea, photographing it, creating sculptures out of its salt, ranging from a baptismal font to a pair of salt-encrusted worker’s boots, strangely placed in the sea near Gdansk, Poland.

Some of the salt sculptures were indeed eerily beautiful, but Penny asked softly, “Where is the sea?” Although one video work followed a young man on a tightrope between the two shores, the sea itself was nearly absent. A disturbing feeling, then, of the salt sculptures as all that would remain of a cherished and unique body of water; the Dead Sea with its mirrors in the human imagination for so many centuries.

In his poem “Going, Going,” Philip Larkin wrote of his own cherished land and humanscape of England:

It seems, just now,
To be happening so very fast;
Despite all the land left free
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn’t going to last.

But the Dead Sea is still with us, right before our eyes, even if we strain to see the receding shoreline from the Lido, or cannot follow the gazelles to its current edge. As with the various climate catastrophes that face us, it is not that we do not know what needs to be done – one obvious example would be to restore the dying Jordan River, the Dead Sea’s main water source, by ending the many diversions of its waters. It is that we do not act.

A video in “The Burning Sea” exhibition shows men (and mostly men) at a round table at a conference on the Dead Sea. There is a plan on the table but, alas, no agreement on its implementation. Under the table, a small girl ties the conference participants’ shoes to their chairs. It is perhaps an image of deadlock – but it could also be a signal from a younger generation to an older generation that they cannot resume normal life until their elders take action.

PART FIVE

Ramallah Ruins and the Future of Our Past

The land huddles close to me
Letting her stones of love
Shield me.

Rashid Hussein, “The Land”

13

The Ruins of Ramallah: What We Do Not See

In the mid-1990s, when we were building our house in the Tireh neighborhood of Ramallah, we began to explore our new location. “There are tombs,” our friend Samar told us when she was visiting her sister nearby. “Just below, I’ll take you to them.”

We carefully made our way down a steep hill covered with brush and thorns and dotted with untended olive trees. And there they were – a row of burial chambers carved into the rock face. “Byzantine or late Roman,” Samar guessed, and we, somewhat ignorant of burial practices in the first centuries after Christ, nodded our heads.

Those tombs are now themselves buried, under a new apartment building, a road expansion and piles of construction rubble. Around 2006 the builders of this new apartment compound bulldozed a parcel of land of 600 square meters, down to bedrock, probably destroying, according to archaeologist Salah Houdalieh, “all associated artefacts and features located nearby.” And thus the burial caves were no more. Houdalieh was not only lamenting the physical destruction of this one site. As Israeli archaeologist Raphael Greenberg has argued, “Archaeologists are in the business of creating collective memories.” That Houdalieh and other Palestinian archaeologists can only conduct their work within the handful of Palestinian

cities that are in Area A restricts their work and our understanding of the relation of the past to our present.

These caves were part of Khirbet Tireh. A *khirba* (meaning a ruin in Arabic) is usually a hill made of layers of habitation and archaeological ruins. Khirbet Tireh was inhabited from Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic times, and was a site of agriculture from the Ottoman period up to Ramallah's urban development. It was rich with artefacts from all these periods, from our caves to the ruins of two Byzantine churches (or perhaps one church and a Byzantine villa or monastery), to fortifications, to olive and winepresses. Many of these artefacts vanished even earlier than the burial tombs. The building of the Women's Training Center in 1962, a project of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees, and the building of St. George's School by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in 1999, both contributed their share to the damage. But the latest destroyer is our neighborhood gas station. The owner received a permit with the condition that he did not destroy a Byzantine water reservoir located two meters from his site. He promptly bulldozed the site to five meters below bedrock. As we write, he is extending the station to the north, revealing what looks to us like a deep cistern with steps down to its floor.

Houdalieh estimates that about 75 percent of Khirbet Tireh has been destroyed. What remains is thanks to the same Orthodox Patriarchate that built the school and owns the land on the western side of Tireh Road, as well as to Houdalieh and his team of students from Al Quds University who conducted three excavations on this land over the summers of 2013 to 2015. One June morning in 2013, Raja and I found them under a green canopy, loading off buckets of stones and dusting a mosaic floor. It was our first glimpse of the team and our first meeting with the energetic Dr. Houdalieh. We were delighted that some of the rich cultural heritage of our neighborhood would be preserved, including the two Byzantine churches. (A later effort to preserve the mosaics of the eastern church on the site by the Al Quds team came in 2019.)

The land that the Al Quds team was excavating belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church and its preservation was propelled also for religious reasons. For the Orthodox Church, it is a sacred site, as a small whitewashed chapel recently built on the site attests. The chapel, and perhaps the ruins of the Byzantine churches, honor the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen, who was stoned to death in Jerusalem; among those who stoned him, it is said, was Saul of Taurus, who after his conversion to Christianity became Saint Paul. Saint Stephen's body was then allegedly brought to our Tireh site, then a garden, and buried. In some accounts, the body was later re-interred and buried elsewhere, one claimant being Beit Jamal near the Latrun salient, where an attractive Salesian convent now sits. Houdalieh notes the discovery of a Greek inscription in the ruins of one of the Byzantine churches, which offers some evidence that the ancient church honored Saint Stephen and his burial there, but this, like so much else in the archaeological and biblical wars, is contested.

On our neighborhood walks, we usually peer over the gate and high fence, straining to see the ruins. The gate is often locked, but on one Sunday recently we were fortunate and entered again. The site is well-tended, blessedly free of the garbage that litters the hills and streets around it, but there are no signs to tell the visitor what they are seeing. We could make out the wall and door of one of the churches, as well as a cluster of graves and several olive presses from a later period. The mosaics were covered in order to preserve them and we were not sure what else we were seeing. Some of the deep holes, we suspected, were "looting holes" prior to the excavations. Still, for most urban Ramallah folk, the *khirba* is simply not noticed at all, as traffic – private cars, taxis and the ubiquitous and noisy motorcycles – speed down Tireh Road, stopping only at the ever-growing number of cafés, grills, stores and, of course, our infamous gas station.

But we wondered what else we had not seen in the town where we have lived for so long. Were there other ruins literally under our feet or lying near the roads where we often traveled? We turned again to the research of Professor Houdalieh and decided to find out. He identified two other *khirbas* in our urban conurbation of Ramallah and its sister city al Bireh.

We drove with Bassam to see what we could find. “Let’s begin with the closest one,” Bassam suggested, and thus, on a warm afternoon at the end of September, we set off to see what was left of Khirba Raddana, a site occupied from the early Bronze Age. It was excavated by American archaeologists in the 1960s and 1970s, who uncovered the foundations of an Iron Age building complex and other artefacts of that period (thirteenth century BC) including an inscribed jar with several bull’s head spouts.

“This is it,” declared Raja, as we parked before a hill of rubble edged by high-rise buildings. “I remember it well from the 1980s.” His two companions expressed doubt. “But the Google map says Raddana is down the valley across the road,” Penny remarked. Memory versus Google, individual experience versus internet wisdom – we three stood for a moment arguing amiably.

We looked again at the uninviting hill of rubble. Along its eastern edge stood the high-rise building that the Palestinian Broadcasting Authority had purchased from an investor who made his money in the Gulf, and who was able, after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, to get permission through dubious means to build on this archaeological site. We’ve been told that, during the construction, the workmen used the site as a staging post for construction materials and dumped debris and waste, including piles of hardened cement that obscure the view of the site from the east. And indeed that was all that was visible.

But then, Raja’s memories returned to unseat the detritus of the present. It was the 1980s and Khirba Raddana on its high hill (or Tell) was across the road from the Tagart Building housing the Israeli military court. Raja described the time in the late eighties when he would leave the court with its oppressive atmosphere and walk over to the Tel. “I didn’t know much about the history of the place, just that it was an important archaeological site. Yet just being on one of Ramallah’s hills with a cool fresh breeze blowing and strolling along the ruins of a distant past cleared my head and gave the gloomy present some historical perspective.” Perhaps this is the point behind preserving historical sites. They act as reminders of other eras, helping us tolerate the contingent present.

The Iron Age ruins of Tel Radanna concealed by the building of the Palestine Television Tower and its construction rubble, Ramallah.

Yet if that was the purpose served by Ramallah's ancient *khirba*, we can no longer learn its lessons. The present is now dominated by the Palestine Television tower perched on the site, transmitting images of our contemporary reality, and leaving no margin for reflection nor helping us to put the ugly present in perspective. Nonetheless we scrambled up the piles of rubble and felt again the cool breeze as we scoured the ground for any

evidence of what once was human habitation. We descended clutching a few pottery shards, all that remained of a once important site.

Memory, now, is the only preserve of Khirba Raddana. As we drove down the valley, we encountered the present Google reality: a new public park and recreational site that has been given the name Raddana. Children were playing on the slides and swings, while a barbecue sent smoke into the hazy air. The new Raddana offers a safe place for children to play, shaded by trees and with a touch of peace. But it could not keep us.

We decided to visit another Ramallah ruin, Khirbet Shuwayka. We had seen a photo of the *khirba* from a decade ago and had hopes that it was still intact amid the rapid growth of its surrounding Palestinian neighborhood of Um Sharayet. In case of disappointment, Raja suggested a short stop first at a secure archaeological site, the Church of the Holy Family in al Bireh, where the municipality had established a small archaeological park in the 1990s. Navigating the narrow alleys of the old city of Bireh, we parked outside one of the small shops that lined the street, where the shopkeepers were sitting outside in the sun. Time seemed to slow down. “Like the old days,” we remarked, contrasting it with bustling, ever modernizing, Ramallah.

The church is said to be on the site where the Holy Family rested on the way from Jerusalem to Nazareth and where Mary and Joseph, according to the sign helpfully posted in Arabic and English, rather mysteriously “discovered that Jesus was missing.” The ruins of the church, protected by a wall and wire netting, is adjacent to the Al Ein Mosque. The church itself – identified by the sign as Romanesque, but perhaps with an earlier origin – was abandoned after the Crusades and a mosque, the ancestor of the one now present, was erected in memory of Caliph Omar, who, it is believed, also passed by Bireh on his way from Medina to Jerusalem in the seventh century. (Bireh seems to have been a favorite rest stop!) When the caliph arrived in Jerusalem, the Byzantine patriarch Sophronios surrendered to him, ensuring peace for the city. And when Sophronios invited the caliph to pray inside the Holy Sepulchre, Caliph Omar refused, not wanting to set a precedent whereby the church would become a mosque. Whether a legend

or not, we find the story poignant as we contemplate the paired ruins of a Byzantine church and a working mosque. It is possible, in this ancient land of claim and counterclaim, whether over religion, tribe or nation, to see things in terms of friendly succession perhaps, rather than perpetual conflict. Our trio, two lapsed Christians and a secular Muslim, stand at the gate and wonder what the stones can tell us.

Peering over the closed gate toward the church ruins, we can see part of the basilica, several fonts and three semicircular apses. We wonder whether the apses once held statues but there is no one to ask and no guide to turn to. A preserved site at least, but one, we assume, that is largely unvisited and unremembered, including, we admit, by ourselves – a sobering admission.

The ruins of the Romanesque Church of the Holy Family next to the Al Ein mosque in al Bireh.

We are silent at first as we drive on in our quest to find Khirbet Shuwayka. On the road to Jerusalem, we pass the Amari refugee camp, a site of more recent sorrowful memories, those of the lost cities from which these families were expelled in 1948 and 1949, and of the fallen young men, women and children killed or injured in army raids on the camp. “We should be close now,” says Penny, ever the earnest student, but there is nothing on the western side of the road except yet more high-rise buildings and we begin to fear that the growth of Um Sharayet has imperilled the site we seek. Um Sharayet is translated as “mother of rags,” perhaps, some say, because of the presence of a spring where women washed the family clothes. Until the 1990s, it was a quiet neighborhood where refugees from the Amari camp might move if they could afford the slightly better housing, and where some Jerusalem families had bought properties in the southern section, where an invisible line demarcated the greatly expanded borders of the city. (In 1967, after East Jerusalem was occupied in the war, Israel expanded the territory of Jerusalem from 38 square kilometers to 108 square kilometers.)

Construction accelerated in the post-Oslo years and particularly after 2000 and the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada, when Israeli military closures propelled many from the northern and southern West Bank, who worked in Ramallah, to seek low-cost housing there. High-rise buildings, constructed hastily, and sometimes shoddily, marched through the neighborhood. Some of these buildings even collapsed: had Khirbet Shuwayka also disappeared?

We drive even further, feeling increasingly doubtful. Resourceful Bassam suggests we go on. “There is Tell en Nasbeh,” he says encouragingly. “It has ruins.”

Well, any old ruin might suit our quest, we think, as we turn up a road toward the Tell, a high hill towering over us. On the side of the dusty, pock-marked road, yet more high-rise buildings were being erected, workers trundling debris in wheelbarrows and dumping their contents. We park at the beginning of a dirt road going up to Tell en Nasbeh. Across from us is a pleasant villa with a large garden and a secure gate, an incongruous site in

the welter of construction dust. A blue sign proclaims its address in large letters as JERUSALEM. We had indeed crossed the invisible line, although, as far as we knew, the Jerusalem municipality refused to extend any services (or even recognition) to the section of Um Sharayet within its boundaries and many Jerusalem families were forced to leave their homes there – aptly termed by a British sociologist the “ghosts of Jerusalem” in “Ramallah’s haunted landscape.”

We walk up the dirt road, examining the remains of excavations, and stand before the impressive remnants of a gate to what was once a fortified Iron Age city. Three teenage boys, enjoying their Friday afternoon vacation with a small fire brewing tea, hail us. “Come with us, we will show you something.” We obediently follow and the youngest scrambles ahead. “Look, caves,” he says proudly. And indeed, there before us were a series of burial caves. We stood at the top of the Tell, examining pottery shards on the ground, and raising our heads to a view of gray apartment buildings standing like sentinels of a desolate modernity. There was something comforting about turning back to the site of an Iron Age city, and imagining the agricultural fields extending far beyond its walls. “Amazing that we have never been here,” said Raja, as we considered again just how little of our own city and its environs we have seen.

As we returned to our car, a middle-aged man, glowing with health, emerged from the villa and we asked him about the elusive *khirba*. “Of course I know it,” he said confidently. “It’s just opposite the Tarifi Events Hall” (in Um Sharayet).

Ah ha, a modern and fitting landmark – that hall being of one of a proliferation of wedding venues that have replaced those in Bir Nabala as more convenient and relatively inexpensive. And Tarifi, of course, signals a family of contractors famous for both wealth and a welter of connections across many lines.

We are here, we exclaim triumphantly, when we find the roadside site with its sign announcing Khirbet Shuwayka. It’s across from the gleaming Tarifi Events Hall, with its pillars and gold-flecked frontage. “I’ve passed here hundreds of times and never seen it,” marvels Bassam, as we stand at

the gate, peering at the ruins of a Byzantine church. That Bassam, who not only gets around but is attentive to his surroundings, had also missed this site in the middle of the bustling neighborhood surprised us. It is, we say to each other, further evidence of what one does not see.

A sign erected by the Bireh municipality and the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage was posted at the gate describing the excavations that had occurred at the site from the time of a Mandate-era initiative to the more recent work of the ever-active Houdalieh and his team. The sign, in English and Arabic, was marred with a lateral slash, either deliberately or the work of time and weather. A passing young man, however, disapproving of the damage, commented, “That’s because it is a church.” Once again, the matter of interpretation – conflict and animosity or simply decay?

The gate was open and we stepped cautiously on the rough ground, trying to ignore a disintegrating mattress and assorted litter as we began our tour. We could make out the rectangular stone forms that were once houses and the basilica of the Byzantine church that must have dominated these dwellings. The cheerful sight of the remains of a large winepress added to the feeling that once a community lived and prospered on this site. However, when we looked up, we noted buildings encroaching, including a sports and social clubhouse built by the Fatah political movement. The Palestinian Department of Antiquities filed a civil case in 2004 asking for its removal – which the Palestinian court ordered – but nothing happened. It’s too melancholy, we thought, to consider this exercise of petty political power now that we have found Khirbet Shuwayka at last, even if some of its archaeological riches are lost under the cold cement of a club that looks, we agreed, unwelcoming. We close the gate behind us as we leave but it clangs open. Khirbet Shuwayka is protected only by its ghosts – and perhaps by those of us who have finally taken notice of the Ramallah ruins all around us, offering us a glimpse of a rich past.

14

Unprotected: A Palace, a Shrine and a Sunlit Hill

It was a cool May day when we decided to visit the Al Samhan palace, an imposing feudal mansion situated on top of a rocky hill in the Palestinian village of Ras Karkar near Ramallah.

In late Ottoman times, prior to the British Mandate, Ras Karkar was known as Ras Ibn Samhan and was one of the twenty-four throne villages in the central highlands. Throne villages (*Qura al-Karasi* in Arabic) were "county seats" ruled by rural semi-feudal sheikhs. They were administrative centers where the village sheikh collected taxes and provided protection for the villages under his command. As Ottoman rule weakened, the autonomy of these local leaders grew. Just north of Ramallah, the contemporary village of Ras Karkar was a mere half-hour drive away and yet our last springtime walk there, with friends from our walking group, had been over a decade ago. It had been a festive occasion, when we'd sat on the parapets of the newly renovated palace munching on our shared picnic and enjoying the lush spring landscape that was carpeted with wildflowers.

This time, as we left the Ramallah enclave, the sad thought crossed our mind that our city – the seat of the Palestinian Authority and of our self-declared statehood – was simply another version of a throne village, exercising an ever-weakening degree of autonomy and subject to a much

more imposing central authority: the Israeli occupation. Our Palestinian president, to be sure, has been in power without elections long enough to qualify as a feudal sheikh. The village of Ras Karkar, with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, had certainly receded from its earlier power and glory. Visiting its seat of power perhaps held lessons other than the architectural.

It took Sheikh Ismail Ibn Samhan fourteen years to build the four-story Samhan palace, including an inner courtyard that could host hundreds of people, completing the project in 1799. It now sits uninhabited, with Ras Karkar increasingly isolated by a ring of ever-expanding Israeli settlements.

Between 2007 and 2009, during a more hopeful period, Riwaq, the Centre for Architectural Conservation, supported by German funding, renovated the palace, aiming both to stimulate visitors and tourists and to offer a center for community activities. We had hoped to walk again in the castle’s intricate passageways, to stand on its ramparts, and to find out if the now renovated castle had found a new purpose, since our visit over a decade ago, in serving those who live and work in Ras Karkar.

One of the entrances to the late Ottoman Al Samhan palace in the village of Ras Karkar near Ramallah.

The facts, however, suggested otherwise. The majority of land around Ras Karkar falls under Area C, where, since the Oslo Accords, there is sole Israeli control. Much of this land is used by the surrounding settlements, while two-thirds of the village's labor force works in Israel itself or in the

settlements. And even where the Palestinian Authority could play a role, Ras Karkar's services are fairly limited: villagers must travel to the village of Kfar Nimeh three kilometers away for health services and secondary school education. As we began the drive from Ramallah to Ras Karkar, we tried to clear our minds of statistics and instead observe our surroundings.

Bassam was driving and he decided to use a half-finished road to avoid the traffic in what is called the Ramallah industrial zone. That road cuts through a beautiful wadi called Wadi El Kalb (The Valley of the Dog) but now, as we looked around, we saw new buildings encroaching from all sides. Last winter the run-off water from the surrounding hills created a pond that lasted for several months. The valley acts as a funnel for the humid wind from the coast, thus helping to cool Ramallah in summer. But it is unlikely that municipal planning would take such environmental factors into account and leave a passage unobstructed in order to avoid flooding and retain that refreshing wind.

Leaving the wadi, we passed through the village of Ayn Arik, which huddles in a fertile valley nestled between two hills and is famous for its pomegranate and citrus trees. The Valley, we could see, remains untouched, lush and verdant and without a building in view.

The road through Ayn Arik was, for a time, during and after the second intifada (2000–2004), the only road that commuters could use to connect Ramallah with a large number of villages to the north, including Ras Karkar. Early in 2002, prior to the re-invasion of the West Bank in the spring of that year, the Israeli army decided to block this road. The army checkpoint at the uppermost part of the hill before the road curves was known, aptly, as a "strangulation checkpoint" and was notorious for the brutality of the soldiers manning it. Every day, whether in the heat of summer or the cold and rain of winter, hundreds of schoolchildren, workers, sick people who needed to reach doctors, shoppers and professionals trudged down the hill to the valley to reach schools, places of work, hospitals and offices, unable to cross through the strangulation checkpoint staffed by eight young Israeli soldiers.

Then one day something happened. The villagers say that a Palestinian man trying to pass through was stopped. He was taken down to the valley and, in their words, was “shot dead like an animal and his body thrown to the dogs.” One of the soldiers taking over from the battalion responsible for the killing described it thus: “A Palestinian didn’t want to show his ID card and took the commander’s knife from him. A soldier at the checkpoint slammed a bullet into him and the Arab died.” Soon after this killing the checkpoint was attacked at night by two Palestinian fighters who killed six of the eight soldiers operating it.

After the shooting, the regional council of the nearby Jewish settlement began building a memorial center for the dead soldiers. Their families were not informed nor were they asked if they wanted such a memorial near the Palestinian village of Ayn Arik. When Robi Damelin, the mother of one of the deceased, learned about the plan, she said that her son “opposed settlements in the territories and supported Peace Now. I am against everything that’s happening in the territories and cannot imagine David’s memory being perpetuated there. This is a cynical exploitation of bereavement to fix facts on the ground in a place they will have to argue about afterward.” Damelin became a leading activist in the Parents’ Circle, where both Israeli and Palestinians who have lost an immediate family member gather “for reconciliation and dialogue.” As we drove past the site of the shooting, we were relieved that the proposed Israeli memorial was never built.

Driving along Wadi Dilab (the Valley of the Plane Tree) to the main road, we passed through an open yellow metal gate that could be closed at any time whenever the Israeli army decides to punish the surrounding villages north of Ramallah, cutting off the only road that connects them to the city. We were relieved that the yellow gates were open.

On our right, atop a gentle hill, we could see one of the oldest settlements in the vicinity of Ramallah. Dolev was established in the early 1980s and is now home to some 2,000 Israeli Jews, among whom is the Israeli High Court judge, David Mintz. Just three days before our trip, on May 4, Mintz, along with two other Court Justices, had denied the appeal

against the eviction of the residents of the South Hebron villagers of Musafar Yatta. Consequently, the Israeli liberal newspaper *Ha'aretz* had described the High Court verdict as a rubber stamp of the occupation.

Turning left to Ras Karkar, we passed by the sign that warns Israelis not to enter, because it is against the law for them to visit an area controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Then we passed through another yellow army gate. When closed, this single gate imprisons the residents of the village. Up through narrow winding roads we drove to the Ottoman palace. But, disappointingly, we found it closed and so had to call one of the owners to come and open the metal door. He seemed glad to greet visitors and accompanied us into the palace.

Now, fourteen years after the skilful Riwaq renovations – recalling the fourteen years it took the Samhan family to build it – the imposing palace is home mainly for the pigeons who fly through the broken windows. A member of the Samhan family, a compact man in his fifties full of vigor and complaints, accompanied us as on our tour. He pointed out the rooms where the families of the tax collectors lived during Ottoman times, and, on the very top of the building, the sheikh's *diwan* – a room for receiving guests – with its blue-ribbed domed ceiling. Our excited guide occasionally interjected hopeful comments: "Perhaps this room could be a bedroom for tourists when the palace is turned into a hotel?" "Perhaps here in the courtyard we could have a restaurant and serve *musakken*?" (This is a spicy chicken dish on taboon bread.) We remained silent as we looked at the sorrowful state of the building, which was full of pigeon droppings, unable to come up with an encouraging response. The last public activity we knew of at the castle was a well-attended classical music concert during the Sounding Jerusalem Chamber Music festival of 2009. Our guide did remark that the castle hosted one Ramadan night this year. "But it was too rowdy, so we won't do it again."

Next we descended a short flight of stairs that led down to a small, windowless, forbidding room that was probably used as a prison for various offenders, including, perhaps, those farmers delinquent in paying their taxes. The view from the terrace outside of the door of the *diwan* was

unobstructed, the fields below patterned with olive trees and plants. But in every direction there was either a Jewish settlement or one in the process of being built.

Since we were so close by, we decided to visit two Sufi shrines, the Nebi Ayoub and the Nebi Anir shrines. Although we were particularly eager to visit Nebi Anir, with its ruins stretching back to the Iron Age, we had been warned in Ras Karkar against doing so because of its proximity to the settlement of Talmon: “The settlement guards will come down and question you. It can be a big problem.”

We thus headed down the hill to Maqam Nebi Ayoub, the shrine of Job. When we arrived, we realized that we had often passed this small, gray-domed building and the poor dwellings scattered around it but had hardly noticed their presence.

We walked down an unpaved, dusty road to the entrance but found its metal door firmly locked. In the land beyond the wire fence encircling the *maqam* a crimson hollyhock was growing. Raja looked on admiringly, wishing he could get some seeds to plant in the garden. But alas, the gate to the surrounding land was also locked. The ancient spring of Ein Ayoub had metamorphosed into a simple water pipe, some strands of greenery surrounding it.

We were about to leave when we saw a man wearing a blue shirt busy planting. We asked him how we could access the shrine. “The woman living over there is the keyholder for the gate,” he said, “but she lost it three years ago.”

Disconsolate, we were on our way out when a woman with a bright expression leaned over her stone wall next to the *maqam* and called to us. We asked whether it was possible to visit the *maqam* and she simply gestured and said “come this way.” We entered her small garden, where she was planting squash near the door to the holy place.

Um Zaher, dressed in an orange robe and pink hijab, her hands marked by henna, was the unofficial guardian of the shrine. She told us of its recent history. Several years ago, a disturbed and destitute man had appeared at the spring and she took pity on him, offering him the *maqam* for shelter. Soon

he started bringing garbage and filling the place with detritus. When he died two years ago, she found that he had completely filled the shrine with refuse, which she burned before carefully cleaning the place. “I intend to paint it soon,” she added.

We entered the shrine’s one room with some trepidation, but Um Zaher had swept it clean. Pairs of bluish handprints decorated the gray walls amid the charcoal from the fire. She explained: “People who have made a holy vow, for example that if they visit Palestine again, they will return and visit this *maqam*, then they dip their hands in henna and place their palms on the wall.”

We stood together for a while outside as Um Zaher continued her stories. Leaning over the wall of her house, her pink scarf covering her hair, she proceeded to tell us how Sayidna (“our lord”) Ayoub came to the spring and found respite. Ayoub (Job) had been cursed with many diseases and had lost all his children. He was brought here to the spring with his wife, who was also his cousin and much younger than him. She fed him and took care of him until one day he asked her to bring a whole loaf of bread. He was tired of eating crumbs, he said. So she went to the village of Deir Ammar. Here Um Zaher paused and, with an impish look, said that the village then was known as Deir El Hummar (Donkey). There, she continued, Ayoub’s wife saw a woman who had just baked bread. She asked her for a loaf. But the stingy woman said that she would only provide one if Ayoub’s wife cut her hair, which was in a braid, and gave it to her. At first, Ayoub’s wife refused and walked away. But then, regretful that she had not fulfilled her husband’s request, she cut her hair and gave it to the woman.

Meanwhile, Ayoub saw a featherless bird drop into the water of the spring and re-emerge with its feathers restored. He was tantalized. Perhaps, he thought, the spring has magic restorative powers. So he dipped a cloth in the spring water and applied it to his wounds, and sure enough his wounds were healed. When his wife returned, she did not recognize him. He had reverted to being fourteen years of age and was fully recovered. “Where is my Ayoub?” she asked. “It is I,” he replied. She believed him only when she had checked for the seven hairs her husband had on his shoulder.

Embracing, he asked her what had happened to her hair. When she explained, he told her to go back to the woman and retrieve her hair, and, when she did so, Ayoub managed to reattach her braid.

Um Zaher finished her story by saying: “And this is the origin of the popular saying ‘Sabr Ayoub’ (Ayoub’s patience).”

We had learned so much that we considered, briefly, continuing to Nebi Anir, but then recalled the warnings from Ras Karkar. “You see how our land is forever becoming smaller,” said Bassam. Sadly, he was right. It would take the patience of Job to survive – if not thrive – here, as we are squeezed ever tighter by the settlements.

The shrine of the prophet Job, neglected except for the care of a neighboring woman, on the side of a highway near Ramallah.

As we walked back to the car, we noticed a number of billboards by the side of the road, all entirely in Hebrew. Surely, we reasoned, these were aimed squarely at Israeli Jews and not the Palestinian users of the road. And

just as surely no permission had been sought, or fee paid, to the Palestinian owners of the land where they stood. One sign was advertising expensive homes in the settlement of Dolev, a short distance up the hill. The High Court judge, we thought, must be doing well.

Our visits over, we turned from the main road to return to our own throne village: the seat of a minor power in a landscape where power is held by a hostile force, and where the Samhan palace, the inhabitants of Ras Karkar, the Ein Ayoub shrine and the sunlit hills stand unprotected, threatened with destruction. For the time being, all that our contemporary throne village in Ramallah can offer are words of protest.

15

Compelled by Memory: A *Qasr* in the Ramallah Hills

There was a time when the qasrs that dot the hills around Ramallah served a practical purpose. *Qasr* means castle in Arabic, but the drystone structures in our hills resemble ancient cairns rather than grand buildings like Qasr Hisham, an Umayyad palace in Jericho. These rural qasrs built of field-stone, earthen mud and mortar (a mixture of earth with lime, ash and gravel) were used by the farmers for storage of their vegetables and olives from early spring to late autumn. They also provided a shady nook for farmers during hot summer days, as well as a place to socialize with neighbors from other fields. At night farmers used their roofs to sleep, as well as to guard their crops. Now our *qasrs* commemorate an old way of life that is no more.

With the urban development of Ramallah spreading to the hills all around the city, many of the old *qasrs* that stood in the way were demolished. The few that remain might not be here for long. Among these is one that we often visit when we walk in the hills. Built over a century ago it’s a two-floor square structure, unlike the traditional *qasrs*, which are round. Sitting midway on a high hill, it is visible from the winding road that curls down from Ramallah to the village of Ayn Qinya. Over many years, during the Palestine Festival of Literature founded by the Egyptian writer

Ahdaf Soueif in 2008, and known colloquially as PalFest, Raja would be invited to take the participating international and local writers on a ramble in the hills. He always made sure that the walk would end at the *qasr.* Sometimes, for variety, Raja would venture an untried route, leading writers from all over the world through thorns and rough stony terrain so that, as he would justify it, the writers could have an experience of the hills. Most persisted without undue complaint.

When they arrived at the *qasr*, everyone had to bow their heads to enter through the low door. Inside is a stone ceiling with a domed shape and circular stairs attached to the wall. On the second floor everyone would linger, sitting on the floor and on benches below the double windows to enjoy the cool air and look out at the hills framed by the rectangular openings. Afterward, Raja and his guests would climb another set of stairs to the roof, and sit under the open sky to listen to a reading amid the terraced hills.

An impressive *qasr* in the Ramallah hills.

Except for the olive trees, the hills today are dry and uncultivated, although still carpeted with wildflowers in springtime. It is difficult to imagine how, until the early 1950s, grapevines graced every terrace wall. The grapes they produced were famous for their crisp texture and sweet taste.

But early in that decade farmers noticed that the vines in the hills, at a distance from Ramallah, were beginning to wilt and die. They were soon followed by more dead vines closer to Ramallah. The blight continued from terrace to terrace until all the vines were dead and not a single one remained in these hills. It was utter devastation.

The blight was caused by the aphid phylloxera, which attacks the roots and spreads from root to root until it kills the entire field. The only way to have stopped its spread, short of spraying insecticide, would have been to cut down the vines in the aphid's path. Ramallah farmers did not know either practice and were befuddled by what had befallen them. They could only watch in distress as their orchards withered and died.

Interestingly, the phylloxera that devastated the grapevines in the Ramallah hills had a debut incursion in the wine-producing countryside of southern France a century earlier, causing French farmers to abandon their land just as ours did in Palestine. Many farmers migrated to Algeria, which France had conquered in 1830, and the French colony became the largest exporter of wine in the world.

In Palestine, this natural blight was intertwined with the political and human disaster of the 1948 Nakba, only two years before, and led to the loss of one of the main sources of income for the residents of Ramallah. The migration from Ramallah to North America had begun somewhat earlier, but with the demise of the grape harvests and the effects of the Nakba, larger and larger numbers started leaving. By the early fifties there were more former residents of Ramallah living in US cities such as Detroit, San Francisco and Jacksonville than in Ramallah itself. With fewer farmers and less incentive to carry on with backbreaking seasonal agriculture in the stony terraces the hills began to look arid – save for the resilient olive trees – and the *qasrs* no longer surrounded by cultivation were rarely used.

Still, looking from the roof of our *qasr* before noon, as the sun lights up the landscape, we can imagine how the hills used to be. From our elevated lookout point we can see a patch of level ground, green with vegetation, nourished by water oozing from between the rocks of the nearby spring. There, Raja often imagined Abu Ameen, an ancestor of his who makes an

appearance in his book *Palestinian Walks*, picking vegetables and taking them to the nearby *qasr.* Our eyes follow the hills as they curve and twist, enjoying the moment of spring green along the narrow wadi that meanders between them.

But our gaze is soon interrupted by the roar of drilling coming from a nearby bulldozer. And then it becomes clear that the survival of this *qasr* is not assured. The attractive structure, with its two floors, built with no cement by skilled hands and the last reminder of a bygone way of life, may be on its way to perdition. A few years ago Saleh Totah, a US émigré, returned and established an arboretum close to the top of the hill next to where the *qasr* stands. It was accessible by a dirt road. Now that investors have bought land nearby with the intention of building restaurants, the dirt road that snakes up to Saleh's arboretum has been leveled and will soon be asphalted. For now, the road reaches just short of the *qasr.* But with more building, the ancient stones that have held the *qasr* together for over a century will be cast to the wind.

One fine morning, as we sat on the roof of this *qasr* with a friend, looking around at the hills gouged out by roads and the foundations of more planned buildings, and defaced by garbage and construction detritus, our friend said quietly, "Palestine is beautiful, as long as you edit." How true, we thought, as Penny added, "just as it is with the rest of life under occupation."

Not far from where this Ramallah *qasr* stands, on a hill above the spring of Ayn Qinya, there is another round structure, the size of the *qasr.* It is built of cement. It's a pillbox staffed by Israeli soldiers to survey the hills around the Israeli settlements of Dolev, Talmon and others. The settlers in Dolev plant grape vines in surrounding hills that once belonged to the Palestinian village of Deir Ibzi'. They produce wine that they market proudly as the produce of the Judean hills.

It was the eve of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, when we last visited the area. The amplified prayers from the settlement of Talmon reverberated in the hills competing with the call to prayer from the mosques in the nearby Palestinian villages.

If the small aphid transformed the Ramallah countryside six decades ago, the sprawl of Israeli settlements is threatening both land and human communities. Now, more than a quarter of a century after its establishment, Dolev has expanded and taken over the hills to its north for vineyards. Numerous highways for the exclusive use of its Jewish settlers connect it to the many other settlements in the area and to Israel's coastline. Those settlers traveling to and from Israeli cities where they work can only see road signs indicating other Jewish settlements. Traveling on the roads intended for them, they encounter few Palestinian villages. No wonder, then, that we were once stopped by an armed settler and interrogated as to why we were taking a walk in "his" hills. When we asked him what right he had to be there, he answered: "I live here." He then pointedly added: "Unlike you, I really live here."

The descendants of the Ramallah farmers now living in the US who wish to return and live in Ramallah are refused residency by Israel. French Jews (hence the wine) and other Jews from around the world are encouraged and given huge incentives to settle in the settlements around Ramallah.

Analogies have been drawn between the settlement of French countrymen in Algeria and Israelis in the West Bank. After years of waging war, the Algerians won their independence when President De Gaulle realized that the price of holding on to Algeria would be a civil war in France. Then the settlers had to be brought home. Would the threat of a civil war one day force Israel to do the same? For it is the settlers who represent one of the main obstacles to peace between Israel and Palestine. Talking to Yehuda Melzer (a publisher and longtime Israeli activist against the occupation) in the summer of 2023, we asked him if the massive protests against the plans of Netanyahu's far-right government to weaken the Israeli High Court held out any possibilities for the struggle to end the occupation. He admitted that the anti-occupation bloc in those demonstrations was small, but believed that more Israelis were coming to understand that a democratic future required an end to occupation. But then he said ruefully, "I am in my eighties. I have to be optimistic."

As matters now stand in Israel, with the country being ruled by a right-wing government beholden to the Jewish settlers living in the West Bank, the end of the settlement project seems unlikely. Instead, with every passing year, it continues to flourish. As the landscape fills up with more and more settlements the days of our pristine hills seem numbered. These intimations of a dismal future that loomed on the horizon passed through our mind as we turned home and saw our lonely *qasr* on the adjacent hill. But perhaps, we thought, it stood for more than loss. Feeling our age, we decided to agree with our Israeli friend. We have to hold on to hope.

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In the summer of 2022 we visited an exhibition by Will Maclean entitled "Points of Departure," presented as part of the Edinburgh Art Festival. We stood before a series of photographs of cairns built by Maclean and his team on the Scottish Isle of Lewis over a number of years "as monuments commemorating the island's land heroes and their courageous struggle for land reform that resulted in the thriving Gaelic-speaking community that Lewis encompasses today." These cone-shaped structures were referred to as "sentinels in stone." They strongly evoked the *qasrs* still standing in our hills.

One of the cairns commemorated a confrontation in 1918 between crofters (peasant farmers) and Lord Leverhulme, who had purchased the island in 1914 with plans to "modernize" agriculture but which would destroy the crofters' way of life. The crofters, some returning angry from the First World War, confronted the lord at a bridge, and were, perhaps surprisingly, victorious in changing his plans.

The land art series of newly built cairns was called "Compelled by Memory." We have borrowed the title for this chapter because we find it resonant: "compelled" suggests action, rather than simply nostalgia. Could our *qasrs*, those still standing and those we have lost, be incentives for projects to restore their history and place in the ravaged Palestinian landscape?

Conclusion

The Missing Dead, Our Living World

As our journeying came to an end, it was time to return to where we had begun, with that gray memorial stone we discovered in the summer of 2021, on the side of a dusty road commemorating three Egyptian fedayeen (fighters) who perished in the 1967 war. At the time, we had searched for an account of any Egyptians fighting near Latrun, that beautiful but strategic hilltop overlooking Wadi Musrara/Ayalon Valley in the center of the country, but we had found nothing. Then, a summer later, an Israeli investigative reporter, Adam Raz, broke the story in *Ha'aretz* with the headline "Revealed: Dozens of Egyptian Commandos Are Buried Under an Israeli Tourist Attraction." A few miles away from the stone bearing the names of three fallen Egyptians, but across the Green Line separating Israel from the West Bank, Raz disclosed that about eighty Egyptian soldiers had been killed in battle on June 6 and 7, 1967. They were subsequently buried by members of Israeli Kibbutz Nachson in an unmarked mass grave in a nearby field, later the site of an Israeli theme park – Mini-Israel. One member of the kibbutz, Raz reports, tried to break the "conspiracy of silence" in the 1990s and approached the media but the military censor did not permit publication.

In those fateful days in June 1967, the three nearby Palestinian villages of Beit Nuba, Yalu and Imwas (Emmaus) in the Latroun salient were

occupied by the Israeli army, their residents expelled and their villages eradicated. Perhaps the three Egyptians accompanied the residents of Beit Nuba as they fled to the site that would become a "new" Beit Nuba, just up the road from the memorial stone on our side of the Green Line, and were killed during their escape.

As the new year of 2023 commenced, on a clear sunny day, we decided to visit the "Israeli tourist attraction," the site of the secret mass grave of the lost Egyptians. According to Raz, their unmarked grave lay partially under the Mini-Israel theme park, opened in November 2002, which boasts 350 miniature monuments of buildings and sites in the "land of Israel."

Taking a deep breath, we entered Mini-Israel. Aside from a young tourist couple, we were the only visitors that sunny winter day. The place itself had a run-down air, perhaps now out of date in an age in which virtual reality trumps 350 knee-high models. Signs beckoned us, however, and we followed one to Haifa and Acre, two cities we had visited during our explorations. Several uninspired models of buildings of the Haifa Convention Center and Haifa City Hall serve as reminders that monuments can be ugly, but we paused before a model of the remains of the old Ottoman train station, thinking again about lost connections and the vanished Ottoman-built railway that stretched from Istanbul to Damascus and onward to Haifa. And then a memorial we had not visited in Haifa: a wrecked ship that recalls the travails of Jewish immigrants fleeing Europe and trying to reach the Haifa port. Their entry was illegal under the British Mandatory authorities during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. But the Haifa port has a double resonance, as captured here by Israeli philosopher Omri Boehm:

> The city's port is one of the most important gates through which the *ma'apilim* – Jewish refugees who escaped Europe in overcrowded boats and had to be smuggled past the British authorities – came to Palestine. At the same time, Haifa was the site of one of the most traumatic moments of the Nakba – when the city's inhabitants fled by

boat en masse, a critical moment in the collapse of Palestinian society.

Boehm points out that the bombardments and killing orders by Haganah commanders led to this Palestinian exodus and urged that both stories must be remembered "in order to be forgotten."

Boehm's words are pertinent, humane and bear reflection. But, as we discovered from our explorations, official Israel – and, to a large extent, the Israeli public – refuses to remember. Mini-Israel, built not only on the ruins of Palestinian land but in part on a burial ground for forgotten Egyptian soldiers, is a shabby reminder of the art of forgetting *before* remembering or recognition.

Nearby was a miserable representation of Acre – that great seaside city with its famous khans, Crusader fortresses, and Islamic and Christian sites. We stopped at the miniature of the Al-Jazzar Mosque, where we have spent peaceful mornings sitting in its courtyard surrounded by jacaranda trees and flowers. The brief sign noted that it was built by the "Turkish ruler" (actually, to quibble a bit, the Ottoman Bosnian ruler) of the Galilee in the eighteenth century and informed us that today "one out of ten residents of Acre are Moslem." This was the first of several notices where the other inhabitants of the "land of Israel" were identified, sometimes as Muslim, sometimes as Christian, but never as Palestinian or Arab.

We proceeded, heavyhearted, past two monuments in our occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank: Rachel's Tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem (noted as in Judea); and the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians as the burial site of Abraham. A sign described the twelfth-century mosque as neatly divided between Jewish and Muslim worshippers. The exclusions faced by Muslim worshippers and the attacks and harassments at this site had been ignored in this signage, most notably the massacre of twenty-three Palestinian worshippers by Baruch Goldstein, a settler from nearby Kiryat Arba, in February 1994. The National Security Minister in Israel's current far-right government, Itamar

Ben Gvir, had a photo of Goldstein (who died in the wake of the massacre at the hands of an angry crowd) on a wall in his home for many years.

We passed by a statue of a founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, standing on a balcony observing his legacy and the realization of his dream, our nightmare. We paused before “The Tombs of the Kidron Valley” below the Mount of Olives, which listed the graves of Jewish sages and prophets. The adjoining Muslim and Christian cemeteries were not mentioned. Tombs, we thought: perhaps the actual unknown tombs of the Egyptian soldiers lay buried nearby. We remembered our visit to the well-kept cemetery in Nablus for Iraqi soldiers who fell in 1948 and the well-marked graveyards of the victims of the Qibya massacre in 1953 (except for one refugee family; perhaps there are always those who are “forgotten” or “excluded”). The burial of the dead, wrote the seventeenth-century philosopher Vico, is what makes us human.

We did not have the stamina to investigate too closely the Jerusalem model of the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa, alongside the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, accompanied by a cacophony of prayers issuing from a loudspeaker. To reduce the Dome of the Rock, perhaps the most beautiful building in the country, to a tacky model was too much for us. Tired also of straining to read faded signs – and more exhausted by our efforts to match these models with any of our experiences or memories – we left Mini-Israel. We needed to conclude our search in the real city of Jerusalem where we could encounter an actual site of important, if neglected, Jerusalem history, one in our own times.

Just as we were leaving, we stopped at a sign titled “Heroes for Life” telling us that “Every decade about 400,000 Israeli youths go on their post-army trip” to volunteer in Third World countries, whether in Asia, Africa or Latin America. Its goal, the sign read, is “to show the beautiful side of Israel by turning Israel into a world power of volunteers.” Many of these young soldiers would have served in the Occupied Territories – and those who refused did not go on post-army trips to “exotic” places but stayed in prison. The sign ended by quoting former prime minister Shimon Peres declaring that “The state of Israel will be examined not only as a power of

high-tech and agriculture, but also and above all, as a power of kindness, a light unto the nations.” Neither the Egyptian dead lying beneath our feet nor the Palestinians living under Israeli rule in the Occupied Territories seemed to count in this power of kindness.

Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement,
surveys his legacy at Mini-Israel

Our choice of site for the end our painful excursion might seem incongruous. We were heading for the Waldorf Astoria hotel in western Jerusalem, a hotel for wealthy tourists and Israelis seeking the uniform comfort of global luxury. But the Waldorf was originally the Arab-owned Palace Hotel, built during the British Mandate. Its multiple transformations told of a history that intrigued us.

Haj Amin Husseini, appointed by the Mandate authorities to head the Supreme Muslim Council, ordered construction of the hotel in 1928, to compete with the King David Hotel that was being built nearby. At the top of the building's narrow original façade, an ornamental plaque reads (in Arabic), "Just as our forefathers built and did, we build, and we do. This building was built by the Supreme Muslim Council in Palestine in 1929." It was one of the most luxurious hotels in Jerusalem.

In 1933 and 1934 the building hosted two Arab Exhibitions, which attempted to highlight the historical bonds between modern Palestine and the broader Arab world in order to prove that Arab progress was possible despite European colonialism and the region's geopolitical division after the First World War. Palestinian anti-colonial nationalism was central to these fairs, as well as showcasing Arab economic and agricultural development.

In 1935, just a year after the second Arab Exhibition was held, the hotel failed for financial reasons. Competition with the King David Hotel had grown increasingly fierce, and the turbulent political climate drove business away, further complicated by financial mismanagement. British Mandatory authorities promptly leased the premises and used it as offices.

The hotel was the site of the 1936 British Mandate's Peel Royal Commission, appointed in the aftermath of a six-month national strike by Palestinians against British colonial policies and their endorsement of Zionist settler colonialism. It was in this building that the Commission established that the British Mandate over Palestine had become unworkable and a recommendation for the partition of Palestine was made for the first time. Papers in the Central Zionist Archives point to the installation of recording devices by the Zionists in the building to spy on the Commission's secret sessions. The Commission's recommendations were

never implemented but there is an eerie premonition of the future: the coastal area and the Galilee, along with other prime areas, were allotted to the Jewish minority, with 200,000 Palestinians transferred from these areas. (About one thousand Jews were also slated for transfer.)

In less than a hundred years, this building, which had initially operated as a Palestinian-owned hotel, was transformed from what its founder the Supreme Muslim Council had intended into a colonial building, becoming, since 2014, one of the most luxurious hotels in Jerusalem.

As we walked up to the entrance, we noted a Palestinian man in a top hat and tailcoat standing at the door. His demeanor and features made him seem like he belonged to the colonial past, and he acted the part. The hotel's inner courtyard was framed by high, sleek windows topped by horseshoe arches, a reminder of the Moorish and Greco-Roman elements that once graced its eclectic design. The remaining historic stone structure was dwarfed by a glass atrium. The soft piped music, so typical of the global hotel industry, added to the atmosphere of a place that could be anywhere.

It was a cool, overcast autumn morning when we crossed the street from the hotel and entered the Mamilla (Ma'man Allah) Muslim cemetery, the largest and most important Muslim cemetery in Palestine, dating back to the time of Saladin and including several Mamluk tombs. It was used as a burial site until 1927 (although we found graves with dates from the 1930s), at which point the Supreme Muslim Council decided to preserve it as a historic site. We found it open and unprotected, the two-meter-high fence built during Ottoman rule nowhere to be seen, and there was no sign indicating that we were entering a historic Islamic cemetery. There was only a small sign prohibiting the consumption of alcoholic drinks on the site, leaving it for visitors to guess why.

At the end of the 1948 war, the cemetery was on the western Israeli side of divided Jerusalem. Beginning in the 1960s, the Jerusalem municipality built a park, streets and several buildings on the cemetery grounds. Perhaps a thousand graves were exhumed, but their fate, if relocated, is not known. The much-reduced grounds we entered were littered by garbage. We walked among scattered tombstones, with the headstones dislodged or destroyed

and strewn on the ground. We tried to make out the ornamental carving and read the very few inscriptions remaining. Some tombs had been dug out entirely while the inscriptions on others were smudged and tarnished. Holes were dug in others. It was a site of devastation and destruction, with tall pine and ash trees surviving better than the humans buried beneath them. A sunbird chirped in one of the high branches and ravens flew overhead.

Gravestones at Mamilla cemetery, disturbed in the process of building the Museum of Tolerance, Jerusalem.

Not far from the entrance was a domed mausoleum with decorative entrances that were totally shuttered and with offensive graffiti scribbled over them. There was not a single sign indicating who was buried inside. Yet what was even more disturbing than the desecration was the lack of unity or integrity to the site, with nothing to indicate that it had been a place for the burial of Islamic heroes, respected personages, and members of many Jerusalem families for hundreds of years. Crisscrossed by paths that

pedestrians used as shortcuts, the cemetery was divided into various plots, some of which had been tarmacked and used as a parking area. Other sections had residential homes built on them, where residents had put their laundry out to dry, while elsewhere construction was still ongoing for some housing project. It was altogether a sorry site, indicating a total lack of respect, and redolent of an absolute absence of tolerance for the Muslim dead.

The Israeli legal system had offered no protection either. A post-1967 petition by the Islamic Waqf and a 2008 petition by the Northern Islamic Movement to restore and preserve the cemetery were rejected by the Israeli High Court, despite the protests of some Israeli archaeologists. And in the last decade, even more cemetery land has been taken for a massive project. On the northern side of the cemetery, overlooking the unprotected graves and intruding on them was a glass-fronted building, the "Museum of Tolerance Jerusalem, Milken and Mizel Campus." Set on three acres, much of it the former cemetery, its enormous structure is due to be completed soon. (Construction began on April 30, 2004 but was halted several times.) As the bones of the dead were being brought up by bulldozers, the Muslim Supreme Council petitioned the Israeli High Court to halt the building. After a short delay, the court allowed the construction to resume. Human remains continue to be excavated: so much for tolerance toward the living or the dead.

According to the museum's sponsor, the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, the museum will address "global antisemitism, extremism, hate, human dignity and responsibility, and promote unity and respect among Jews and people of all faiths," with another founder adding "love of Israel." There was no mention of the real problems of discrimination and inequality in Jerusalem, let alone the persistence of an illegal occupation.

As we looked up at the forbidding façade of a building supposedly dedicated to tolerance, it became clear to us that confronting the denial of the experiences of the *other*, as well as connections – lost, remembered, present and threatened – are what unites our explorations. Some connections have been lost for centuries but speak of a time when our

region was criss-crossed with pilgrims, adventurers and commercial travelers from Baghdad and Istanbul to Haifa and Acre. Other connections are lost in our troubled present, such as the absolute refusal by Israel to acknowledge the Nabka. Ruins whisper of more ancient times, whether the Byzantine ruins in our own Ramallah neighborhood of Tireh or the intricate Bronze and Iron Age water systems and wine storage vaults unearthed by archaeologists on a hillside near Jib village, now a name for an Israeli checkpoint. Layers of peoples and civilizations – to be cherished rather than reduced to one simple story.

Arriving home, we decided to return to our favorite lookout, the *qasr* high up on the hill of a nearby Ramallah wadi where we have often sat sipping tea and talking with friends. As we were making our slow way up, Raja, looking at the new construction on the top of the hill, said he had a sinking feeling that made him wonder: what if? What if our *qasr* is no longer there? And so, when our path was blocked by a fresh heap of construction rubble covering a mound of older stones, our hearts sank. Then Raja said, in a quiet tone of voice, that he always knew everything he loved in these hills would eventually be destroyed but that he didn't think it would happen so soon. We looked up and could see the settlement of Dolev on a hill in the distance and, all around, on the Ramallah hills, Palestinian buildings, some built over the last decades, some in construction, their rubble sliding down from the hills toward the valleys. At that moment, feeling a hardness that went beyond despair, we no longer had it in us to lament. To paraphrase Yeats, too many disappointments make "a stone of the heart." It was time to go home. As we were leaving we could hear the incessant sound of a bulldozer. Penny stopped to take a photo of a red anemone beside the rubble. "At least," she murmured, "at least."

Looking through the window of our favorite *qasr*,
still intact.

But as we drove back to Ramallah we looked again at the hill to our right and were relieved to see the *qasr*, its limestone reflecting the afternoon sun, still standing. We had missed it on our walk when the path was

blocked. This lifted our spirits and made us realize how willing we were to believe that the worst had happened.

It was the lunar new year and we had fragile hopes that the Year of the Rabbit would bring us better tidings. This was not to be. We recalled artist Walid Abu Shakra sitting on his *qasr* (*mintar* in Galilee terminology) drawing over and over what he saw from his favorite spot. In this age of fear and trembling – and as we ourselves age yet further – we hope that we will continue to pay attention both to what we love and what troubles us and that we will continue our exploration.

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Um Zaher, the caretaker of the shrine of Nebi Ayoub (the prophet Job) tells us of Job's transformation at a nearby spring.

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